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# An Evaluation of Community-Based Juvenile Firesetting Programs Through the Custodial Lens

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Peter W. Blaich

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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

An Evaluation of Community-Based Juvenile Firesetting Programs

Through the Custodial Lens

by

Peter W. Blaich

MPh, Walden University, 2021

MS, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2005

BS, State University of New York, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

February 2023

## Abstract

Using general strain theory and social learning theory as the foundation, this generic qualitative study addressed whether interventions and prevention services for juvenile firesetters in the City of Charlotte–Mecklenberg County met needs from the perspectives of critical stakeholders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 parents/guardians of justice-involved adolescent fire offenders. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a six-step procedure for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke. The study's results revealed that the current juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program is perceived as inadequate when applied without input from the adolescent's parent or guardian. The participants perceived the need for more training to give the fire marshal's office staff appropriate intervention and prevention services and maintained that recommendations from all community stakeholders should be considered in these interventions. The participants perceived the need to create and use a validated risk and assessment tool to assess and identify potential youthful fire offenders within the public school system. Furthermore, the participants perceived the need for segregating the general justice-involved youthful fire offender from those young offenders of fire suffering from behavioral and mental health issues by creating and adapting diversion programs specifically to treat adolescent fire offenders with behavioral and mental health issues and by including better outpatient treatment and follow-up. Positive social change outcomes may be possible, but only if enough psychologists, skilled practitioners, and counselors trained in trauma-informed care, youth indoctrination, adolescent alcohol and cannabis use, and behavioral and mental health issues specific to juvenile firesetters are integrated into the fire marshal's office and the state's juvenile justice system.

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## Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to the 343 members of the Fire Department of New York, the 37 Port Authority Police Officers of New York—New Jersey, and the 23 New York Police Department Officers who died in the terrorist attacks in Lower Manhattan on Tuesday, September 11, 2001; never forget their sacrifice. Furthermore, I extend my gratitude to my Great Grandfather Charles Blaich, Senior, departed Fire Lieutenant, Fire Department of New York; my Grandfather Charlie Blaich, departed Battalion Chief, Fire Department of New York; my Grandfather William Schmid, departed Police Sergeant, New York Police Department; my Father, William Blaich, retired Battalion Chief, Fire Department of New York; and my Uncle Charles Blaich, retired Deputy Chief, Fire Department of New York. Additionally, I dedicate my research study to the departed First Deputy Fire Commissioner of the City of New York, William Feehan, the departed Chief of Department for the Fire Department of New York, Peter Ganci, and Assistant Chief of Fire Prevention of the Fire Department of New York Ronald Spadafora, for helping me develop myself as a professional firefighter, fire officer, fire investigator, and emergency manager. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my departed mother, Dorothy Blaich, for her dedication to raising children and instilling values of honesty, hard work, and sacrifice in my brothers Mathew and Christopher and my sister Ellen and myself. She will always be remembered for raising good kids who went on to commit their lives to public service. My passion for this study was driven by my love for my three sons, William, Adam, and Thomas, for I look into their eyes and see hope in a troubled world.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

People use fire daily; historically, fire has influenced human society (Watson, 2020). Many modern conveniences may not have come to be without the creation and use of fire. However, the malicious use of fire by adolescents can lead to injury, property damage, and death (Kratcoski et al., 2019). A historical average from 2010–2019 indicates that about 14,100 reported structural fires were started by youthful firesetters leading to 210 fatalities, 1,250 severe burns, and \$339,000,000 of insurable loss (Chen et al., 2019). Arson, a type of malicious firesetting, ranked highest among crimes young firesetters participated in, accounting for over 50% of all arson arrests (Campbell, 2021). Arson has remained the only felony crime with more adolescent than adult involvement. From 2010–2019, those under 17 years engaged in the most intentional fire-starting, with 5.7% of all deliberate fire acts perpetrated by those under 15 years. The youthful misuse of fire tends to be underreported; therefore, the above numbers are conservative (Fahy & Maheshwari, 2021).

Many children are curious about fire, but this curiosity can become dangerous, leading to debilitating and scarring injuries and significant financial loss to individuals and society (Chen et al., 2019). Bell et al. (2018) interviewed arsonists and found that 70% of young male people and 44% of young female people engaged in the misuse of fire. In addition, the traits of a typical juvenile firesetter, and therefore the treatment they need, are very complex (Becker et al., 2019). Unfortunately, few researchers have investigated the effectiveness of programs for rehabilitating delinquents who engage in intentional fire play (Bradford & Dimock, 2019). This study aimed to gain the

perspective of parents or guardians of juvenile firesetters by collecting data transcribed into the study's findings as a program evaluation of a juvenile firesetters reinvestment program.

### **Background**

Researchers have described various reasons why juveniles commit malicious acts of firesetting. Chen et al. (2019) detailed that 25% of investigated fires from 2010–2019 were intentionally set. Significantly, during this period, half of those investigated fires were set by individuals aged 11 to 17 years, suggesting that juvenile arson remains a relevant problem within society and that reinvestment alternatives other than incarceration for youthful fire offenders are lacking (Papalia et al., 2019). Early scholars of reinvestment ideology favored a community-based treatment program instead of detention, arguing that juvenile-firesetting programs are needed interventions for youth at risk of malicious fireplay (Kratcoski et al., 2019). In contrast, clinical providers serving at-risk youth have argued that juvenile firesetters have distinctive characteristics and that aggressive early reinvestment is key to rehabilitating a juvenile who misuses fire (Bell et al., 2018).

If not corrected, abnormal firesetting tendencies can negatively impact an adolescent's social and economic outcome through incarceration and recidivism (Steppe, 2018). Bradford and Dimock (2019) explained that juvenile crime has been declining across a broad spectrum of the adolescent population. However, the opposite has been the case among delinquent firesetters, whose numbers within the juvenile justice system have continued to grow—specifically, male adolescents from communities of low socioeconomic status (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020).

Santtila et al. (2020) argued that the criminalization of young people for misusing fire had continued to attract criticism and was a subject of debate in the discussion of juvenile justice reform. Stickle and Blechman (2019) claimed that another way to look at firesetting is through risk factors rather than characteristics. However, they emphasized that risk factors cannot necessarily describe a person completely. Personal, parental, and family influences and stresses include multiple variables that can put a child at risk of developing firesetting behavior (Bradford & Dimock, 2019).

Wilcox and Kolko (2019) noted that a few researchers have looked at the effectiveness of adolescent firesetting treatment for recidivism. Currently, many states have programs to work with young people who commit intentional firesetting; however, few authorities have evaluated such programs' effectiveness in reducing adolescent malicious fireplay.

This study filled a gap in the existing juvenile firesetting literature, lacking follow-up with program evaluation. The City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County's Juvenile Firesetting Intervention and Prevention Program had not previously been evaluated. It is unknown whether this established program mitigates the juvenile firesetting problem in North Carolina. The number of adolescent arrests in the United States has declined significantly, and there has been a fundamental policy shift concerning juvenile justice in this country (Harvell et al., 2019). Recognizing the adverse effects of incarceration on juveniles and communities, those responsible for the criminal justice systems in many states have moved to embrace community-based strategies to prevent and respond to juvenile delinquency (Faranda, 2018). However, many authorities have not participated in community-based adolescent firesetting prevention and reform

and have supported incarceration over reinvestment (Harvell et al., 2019). Failing to address the misuse of fire by young people effectively can negatively impact children's social, emotional, and behavioral development (Faranda et al., 2019) effectively addressing the misuse of fire by young people. Research conducted by Faranda (2019) and Wilcox and Kolko (2019) reiterated much previous research that explains how a draconian response of incarceration over a progressive reinvestment in juvenile firesetting only increases an adolescent's risk of future imprisonment.

Bell et al. (2018) suggested that addressing resistance and denial among adolescent offenders using juvenile history and experiences can influence firesetting behavior. Understanding adolescent lived experiences has the most potential to affect reinvestment policy-making, theory-building, and implementation (Dadds & Fraser, 2019). Studies conducted by some academic researchers have recommended that adolescent counselors and other juvenile justice stakeholders—such as law enforcement officers and fire service personnel—try to structure their interventions to meet the needs and subjective reality of youthful firesetters as a means to alter their destructive behavior (Bell et al., 2018). However, researchers have found that young offenders create their reality through learned perceptions and understandings they construct about themselves, others, and the community in which they live (Kwon et al., 2019).

### **Problem Statement**

The misuse of fire by adolescents can be destructive and is worthy of exploration in the context of the relatively new realm of juvenile offender reinvestment ideology (Becker et al., 2020). Findings reported in existing literature indicate that the problems associated with the misuse of fire by young people are tragic and costly (Chen et al.,

2019). Statistical data reported and analyzed by the National Fire Protection Association indicate that local fire departments responded to an estimated 1,291,500 fires in the United States in 2019 (Ahrens & Evarts, 2020). The fires caused an estimated 3,704 civilian deaths, 16,600 civilian injuries, and \$14,800,000,000 in lost insurable interest. Moreover, arson is the criminal act with the most significant proportion of juvenile arrestees (Bell et al., 2018). In 2018, 20% of all arson arrests involved young offenders, and 58% of the 20% involved juveniles between the ages of 11 to 17 years (Chen et al., 2019). For comparison, 10% of all larceny-theft arrests in 2018 involved juvenile delinquency, and only 28% involved adolescents younger than 17 (Puzzanchera, 2020). An essential aspect of the phenomenon of firesetting is that it is a criminal act more specific to adolescents, to whom half of all set fires in the United States can be attributed (Bell et al., 2018).

Researchers have suggested many reasons for the misuse of fire by young people and characteristics that lead to this destructive behavior; however, few researchers have presented specific evidence-based initiatives that challenge and mitigate the juvenile firesetting problem (Perks et al., 2019). In this study, I looked through the lens of the guardians of adolescents, aiming to contribute to the scholarly literature on the misuse of fire by young people by examining such initiatives and the juvenile justice system's response to adolescents who intentionally set fires.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Through this qualitative study, I aimed to examine the effectiveness of community-based juvenile firesetting programs through a custodial lens in the City of Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Adolescent firesetting prevention and

reform programs appear to be the most used interventions available to North Carolina communities in connection with fire prevention programs and alternative sentencing initiatives for juvenile arson (North Carolina Commission on the Administration of Law and Justice [NCCALJ], 2019). In addition, the juvenile firesetting program is a widely accepted sentencing alternative within the state's criminal justice system (NCCALJ, 2019). This research aimed to describe adolescent malicious fire play and assess a juvenile firesetting intervention program to identify what was working and what was not, allowing future researchers to build on working methods that promote positive social change within the community. In this study, I described the phenomenon of interest using generic qualitative research methods and thematic analysis of interviews with community stakeholders (parents and guardians of adolescents remanded by either court order or voluntary commitment). Moreover, I applied reinvestment ideology to understand the juvenile firesetting problem in North Carolina and the effectiveness of the state's adolescent firesetting programs. In this study, I investigated whether a juvenile firesetting program that focuses on strengthening family support and improving self-control, academic performance and trade-school skills within a community setting effectively promoted a positive social change in the form of better life outcomes for the state's juvenile population.

### **Research Questions**

For this qualitative study, a juvenile firesetting program was examined in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. Two research questions guided the study of a juvenile firesetting program:

RQ1: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program?

RQ2: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program?

### **Theoretical Framework**

A variety of theories are relevant to addressing juvenile firesetting behavior. However, general strain theory and social learning theory provide a foundation for discussing the misuse of fire by young people, and these were the theories underpinning the study (Bradford & Dimock, 2019).

The general strain theory of Agnew (2013), Francis (2019), Bishopp and Boots (2014), and Agnew and Kaufman (2019) provides a social psychological explanation of criminal behavior that is one of the most important theoretical developments in criminal justice studies. Strain is the impact that stressors have on an individual; for example, an abused child may act out by setting fire to the clothes of the person who harmed them (Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). Another example of strain can be explained in a study by Francis (2019) in which a teenage boy began to set fires in his neighborhood after the sudden loss of his father. Stickle and Blechman (2019) explained that by failing to provide positive stimuli to a child, a parent or guardian increases the likelihood that the child will misuse fire as an adolescent. If not addressed through early intervention, this behavior can carry over into their adult life. Different people cope differently with stress.

According to general strain theory, some individuals experiencing stressors express abnormal, antisocial, and deviant behavior, such as juvenile firesetting (Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019).

Social learning theory is an ideology developed to describe socialization and its effect on human development (Bandura, 1977). Proponents of social learning theory look at the individual learning process, the formation of self, and the influence of the community in socializing individuals (Boone et al., 1977).

Social learning theory considers the foundation of people's identity as a learned response to community stimuli (Collins et al., 2021). Social learning theory prioritizes the community context of socialization over individual cognitive development (Cox-Jones et al., 2020). This theory emphasizes that personal identity is not the result of subconscious thought but instead involves forming oneself to meet the perceived expectations of the relevant community (Chen et al., 2019). Adolescents develop behavioral skills in response to community-based reinforcement and encouragement (Collins et al., 2021). Social learning scholars acknowledge that the adolescent's environment is essential, but the identity that juveniles acquire is established more by duplicating the behaviors and attitudes of influencing community-based figures (Faranda et al., 2018).

Rooted in psychology, the social learning theory by Albert Bandura continues to be built upon by theorists and criminal justice researchers attempting to understand crime, disruption, and juvenile delinquency.

Social learning theory explains juvenile firesetting as relief of aggression for a child and as behavior learned through social interactions when juveniles are exposed to various antisocial behaviors (Kwon et al., 2019). Bandura (1977), Boone et al. (1977),

Grusec (1992), Winfree (2015), and Kwon et al. (2019) developed social learning theory, according to which a person is a product of their environment. Kwon et al. (2019) discovered that prolonged humiliation is present throughout the childhoods of juvenile firesetters, with the essential reinforcements coming directly from an individual's adolescent social group. Some researchers claim that enuresis is associated with juvenile firesetting (Chen et al., 2019). Agnew and Kaufman (2019) argued that children express their frustration via antisocial behaviors such as enuresis and firesetting. The existing research shows that adolescents' malicious fire play highly indicates a stressful home environment associated with developmental disabilities. Thus, rather than being labeled by others as potentially violent, abnormal firesetting behaviors should be treated as a warning sign that the child needs professional attention and emotional support (Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019).

In the context of social learning theory, juveniles who associate with delinquent peers are more likely to engage in deviant coping or aggression than children who are not negatively impacted (Chen et al., 2019). In contrast, young people with a support system and close family help are less likely to engage in deviant coping, including misuse of fire, compared to children with insufficient family support (Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019). Individuals with lower self-esteem are less likely to cope with strain and more likely to engage in firesetting as an outlet to elevating pressure than those with effective coping mechanisms (Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). According to general strain theory, male and female individuals experience strain differently (Barreto & Boekamp, 2019).

The use of general strain theory and social learning theory, which formed the study's theoretical framework, helped in framing questions about how adolescents'

stressors and upbringing increase their risk of misusing fire. In addition, general strain and social learning theory helped formulate the research questions about their response to reinvestment services, ultimately determining the effectiveness of these services.

### **Nature of the Study**

The study was qualitative in terms of methodology. This study used a generic qualitative approach to study individual experiences (Pelto, 2018). As this study aimed to examine the interventions and prevention services available in the juvenile justice system for adolescents that intentionally set fires from the perspectives of the youthful offender's parent or guardian, a generic qualitative methodology allowed access to rich data regarding their views.

I used a generic qualitative research methodology in this study to analyze data thematically. Generic qualitative inquiry best investigates people's attitudes, opinions, or beliefs about a particular experience (Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). The focus of the study was the perspectives of parents and guardians of juvenile delinquents. This combination of purpose and principle required that the study be qualitative and use thematic analysis so that I could access rich and descriptive data specific to each individual's perspective.

This study utilized a generic qualitative approach to comprehensively understand the selected population (Pelto, 2018). The study focused on the perspectives of the parents or guardians of juvenile firesetters accompanying their dependent through the interventions and prevention services available in the juvenile justice system for juveniles who have intentionally set fires in the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. The data collected were from the parent or guardian of the juvenile firesetter and not from the individual adolescent. In this study, I used thematic analysis to analyze

the data collected from the juvenile's legal guardians and make sense of the interventions and prevention services available in the juvenile justice system for adolescent firesetters.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data was flexible and was compatible with other approaches such as phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and others used in generic qualitative research driven by specific research questions (Percy et al., 2020). Data I collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which offered investigative insight into the subjective experiences of young offenders. Participants were the parents/guardians of children who had completed voluntary or court-ordered commitments to a juvenile firesetters program. The findings emerged through the lens of the adult custodial participants. The research design helped me analyze the views of the parents or guardians of youthful fire offenders and gain insight into the interventions and reinvestment services available to these most critical stakeholders. Of significance, this study gave voice to the parents and guardians of youthful fire offenders as these custodians tried to alter their adolescents' destructive and malicious firesetting behaviors.

The thematic analysis identified patterns or themes among data specific to juvenile firesetting. Thematic analysis is more than collecting and analyzing statistical information; an excellent thematic analysis involves interpreting and making sense of collected data (Maquire & Delahunt, 2019). By using thematic analysis, I utilized data that had been summarized and organized, and I ensured that all data was analyzed (Majumdar, 2021). Unlike many other qualitative methodologies, generic qualitative research is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective (Patton, 2021). The research questions thus enabled me to be flexible and, at the same time, gain

significant insight into the phenomenon of juvenile firesetting and the programs that attempt intervention and prevention for youthful fire offenders.

Looking through the lens of parents and guardians of young offenders committed to a juvenile firesetters program allowed me to collect qualitative data regarding the phenomenon of youth firesetting—data that was observable but not necessarily measurable (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of these stakeholders who had experienced reinvestment through the juvenile firesetter program helped me suggest improvements to dealing with justice-involved youthful fire offenders. It is essential to understand the experiences and significant impacts of parents and guardians of juvenile offenders who commit acts of arson because these stakeholders provide crucial social and environmental care for these at-risk adolescents (Glancy et al., 2018).

Utilizing the perspectives of parents and guardians benefited the study, as the experiences and knowledge of these essential stakeholders assisted me in suggesting improvements in the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program for youth who intentionally set fires so that they are adequately assessed and can be treated. It was also essential to understand any ideas the parents or guardians might have regarding reinvestment needs, as they provided for daily social and emotional child welfare. Data was collected through interviews with the parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters from the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

### **Definitions**

*Community-based juvenile firesetting program:* The City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetter Intervention and Prevention Program provides

customized educational interventions based on a request from family or as a requirement of the juvenile justice system rendering an adjournment in contemplation of dismissal.

The program's primary goal is to identify children at risk of participating in firesetting and intervene to stop disruptive and malicious behavior. The program is free of charge to individuals aged 11–17 years and requires involvement by parents and guardians.

Lessons address the consequences of firesetting, burn injuries, and North Carolina arson and fireworks laws. The program also provides parental education on home fire safety, responsibility, and decision-making. The City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetter Intervention and Prevention Program treats firesetting by young people as a community problem and, as such, deserving of community-wide attention. Although fire departments may lead in developing programs for children and adolescents involved in firesetting, their efforts alone will not resolve the problem (Bell et al., 2018). A functional linkage must be established between the various community agencies capable of helping young people and their families (Chen et al., 2019). Schools, fire services, law enforcement, the juvenile justice system, and mental health professionals must establish open communication channels to mount an organized effort to reduce youth involvement in firesetting and arson-related activities (Juvenile Justice, 2021).

*Juvenile firesetter:* For children, interest in fire is natural; setting fires is not, and those who engage in malicious firesetting are referred to as juvenile firesetters.

According to the US Fire Administration (2020), 75% of children aged 11–17 years experiment with fire. The median age at which experimentation begins is 11 years, and 53% of all those arrested for arson are children. Of those who die in fires in the United States, 24% die because of the youthful misuse of fire.

*Misuse of fire by young people:* This community-based concern has continued to attract the attention of authorities and researchers worldwide (Chen et al., 2019). The misuse of fire by young people has remained one of the least understood forms of juvenile delinquency (Bell et al., 2018). The study of the abuse of fire by young people has continued to drive systematic analysis, application of criminological theory, and attempts to obtain relevant empirical findings (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020).

*Stakeholder:* In the context of this study, a stakeholder specific to a juvenile firesetter program is a parent or guardian of an offender (Ahrens & Evarts, 2020).

The *Juvenile Justice System of North Carolina* falls under Juvenile Justice, a section of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. The North Carolina Juvenile Justice System generally consists of the juvenile court, the Charlotte Mecklenburg County Police Department, the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Department, the Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office, the attorneys for young offenders and the State's probation officers, and intake staff of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety, the Mecklenburg County Detention Center, and many social service agencies and not-for-profit organizations, including nine separate fire departments and one more extensive municipal fire department. These entities have partnered with the state to reinvest in North Carolina's justice-involved juvenile population (Juvenile Justice, 2021).

In North Carolina, legislation was enacted by the General Assembly, published in the *Session Laws of North Carolina*, and organized and documented in the North Carolina General Statutes. State agency regulations, otherwise known as administrative law, are published in the *North Carolina Register* and collected and recorded in the North Carolina Administrative Code. The North Carolina Building Code and Fire Prevention

Code, adapted from the International Code Council, were enacted by the General Assembly and published in the North Carolina General Statutes. In Mecklenburg County, the Building and Fire Prevention Code is published in the *North Carolina Register* and organized and documented in the North Carolina Administrative Code, thus making the state and local building and fire prevention codes law (Criminal Procedure Act, 2020).

### **Assumptions**

The study involved the assumption that participants would provide necessary and honest information during the interviews. In addition, I sought to establish a rapport with the participants to engage participation and to achieve a successful interview by encouraging them to answer the questions to the best of their ability.

I assumed that firesetting prevention and reinvestment programs in the juvenile justice system are significant to individual juvenile delinquents and have long-lasting effects on communities. A second assumption that shaped the literature review was that adolescent firesetting prevention and reform programs are the most used intervention mechanisms for communities applying progressive reinvestment ideology to young offenders who misuse fire.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

My study aimed to examine the effectiveness of the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County’s community-based juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program and its significance in promoting juvenile reinvestment in North Carolina. The scope of the study was the program, which involved examining data acquired from parents or guardians of adolescents who had worked through the program.

The scope and delimitations of this study included that the results may not reflect the perspectives of all parents and guardians of adolescents with abnormal firesetting tendencies associated with the juvenile justice system (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). The design of the inclusion criteria allowed me to choose the most appropriate participants for the study (Wincup, 2020). Inclusion criteria were based on this study's prospective subjects' characteristics. Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters were selected based on their age, relationship with their child, and active and full participation in the juvenile firesetting program. Exclusion criteria were based on characteristics that disqualified potential subjects from being included in the study. Parents and guardians of juvenile offenders who had not engaged in malicious firesetting behavior were excluded from this study. While quantitative research is about numbers and frequencies, qualitative research involves looking at reasons for human behavior and attempting to explain a phenomenon in more detail than a quantitative study (Yaghi, 2019). I used purposeful sampling to select participants for this qualitative study who were parents or guardians of juveniles who completed the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County youthful fire offenders' intervention and prevention program. I was positioned within the professional community and only requested contact information for possible participants based on this study's inclusion criteria from the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office. I compiled a list of the participants' characteristics. These included age, gender, income, religion, geographical region, and disruptive firesetting behavior. In this study, the sample did not include juveniles but was strictly comprised of adult parents and guardians of youthful offenders suffering from an abnormal firesetting tendency.

I identified and sampled recent parents or guardians of young offenders who recently completed the firesetting intervention program and met the sample criteria. Based on Umamaheswar's (2020) work, I assumed this approach would work particularly well in this study because the sample characteristics targeted a very narrow group. I identified the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetting Intervention and Prevention Program to obtain a purposeful sample. Regarding qualitative research methods specific to this study about juvenile firesetting prevention and rehabilitation, my reading of Prakash (2021) indicated that this was the obvious method. For example, if a researcher wants to know why customers continue to return to a particular store, the researcher should sample at that specific store itself; if a researcher is going to sample the custodians of youthful offenders of fire, that researcher should seek them out at a facility that administers a juvenile firesetting intervention program (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020).

I was affiliated with the fire investigation community as a retired New York City Fire Lieutenant and Fire Marshal. I could ask like-minded professionals to suggest other participants who might qualify for this study. I am a certified fire officer, fire investigator, and emergency manager with over 30 years of public sector experience. I was approved to conduct research for Walden University as a doctoral candidate. Wincup (2020) indicated that purposeful sampling, also known as network sampling, would aid my research by having fire marshals who were professional acquaintances suggest participants who might fit the study's profile. For example, a researcher may ask a school principal to nominate students who fulfill specific criteria for a healthcare study in educational research. A researcher may ask a doctor to select

patients who match sample characteristics. I attempted to include only the best subjects in this study by excluding candidates who did not meet the inclusion criteria (Williams & Morrow, 2019).

### **Limitations**

A significant limitation of the study was the generalizability of its findings to other stakeholders or parents or guardians of juvenile firesetters in other places (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). The lived experiences of stakeholders in the juvenile justice system for juveniles with abnormal firesetting tendencies—such as parents and guardians—may differ from state to state because of the uniqueness of the reinvestment ideologies promoted among various states (Wincup, 2020). Sakheim et al. (2019) reported that although a researcher assumes that participants will answer truthfully during an inquiry, the mere presence of an academic researcher may affect participants' responses.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study, which involved evaluating the effectiveness of a community-based juvenile firesetter program, may help satisfy the need to identify proven and progressive strategies for investing in and continuing to advance community-based reinvestment programs. This study filled a gap in the existing juvenile firesetting literature, which needed follow-up with program evaluation. The study may also promote positive social change by assessing a program's effectiveness, a necessary component when attempting transformational change.

This qualitative study of youth offenders who misuse fire was significant. It gave a voice to adolescents who maliciously set fires as experienced from the perspective of their parent or guardian. Second, although researchers have conducted many quantitative

studies of young arson offenders, relatively few researchers have made qualitative investigations into the effectiveness of community-based juvenile firesetting programs (Beech, 2018)). Third, a qualitative study using the generic inquiry approach allowed me to understand better contemporary and historical influences on North Carolina's juvenile firesetting prevention and intervention programs (Bradford & Dimock, 2019).

Looking through the lens of a parent or guardian revealed information about the adolescent firesetters' culture, struggles, goals, and barriers (Greenberg & Keane, 2019). The study findings can help counselors, school educators, law enforcement officials, fire prevention officers, and health care professionals. Many researchers have conducted quantitative analyses of the transition of juveniles from incarceration to the community. However, only a few researchers have made qualitative inquiries into the misuse of fire by young people and the experiences of adolescents and their parents and guardians throughout a treatment program (Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019).

### **Summary**

The misuse of fire by developing adolescents can be tragic and costly to young offenders and their communities and is worthy of research emphasizing the newer advanced method of juvenile reinvestment over the traditional draconian way of incarceration (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Without proper intervention and prevention programs, young people with abnormal firesetting tendencies are more likely to enter the criminal justice system than those juvenile offenders who receive help and community support (Smith & Natalier, 2021). The general problem is that juveniles engage in destructive behavior through malicious firesetting for many reasons (Becker et al., 2020). Despite nationwide juvenile justice reform that has raised the age of criminal culpability

in North Carolina from 16 to 18, few researchers have investigated evidence-based initiatives and established programs designed to reinvest in juvenile firesetters (Perks et al., 2019).

In this study, I aimed to examine a community-based adolescent firesetter intervention and prevention program available to young offenders who misuse fire. This study explored the program from the perspective of parents and guardians who actively engaged in their adolescent's firesetting prevention and reinvestment. The two research questions that guided the study related to the impact of participants on the juvenile firesetting program and the program's effectiveness. The theoretical framework of the research consisted of general strain theory and social learning theory; generic qualitative research methods and thematic analysis helped understand the data and answer the research questions (Steppe, 2018).

In Chapter 2, I examine the challenges of juvenile firesetter programs that aim at positive reinvestment outcomes for youthful offenders with abnormal firesetting tendencies. Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive review of the available literature. Chapter 3 describes the research process for collecting and analyzing data. Chapter 4 explains the results of this study, whereas, in Chapter 5, I give my recommendations for furthering positive social change within the evaluated juvenile firesetters prevention and reinvestment program.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the research strategy used to find existing literature on juvenile firesetting. Then, in the theoretical framework section, I explain the relevance of general strain and social learning theory to this study. Furthermore, it emphasizes how these two theories were fundamental to the inquiry into what may or may not work when attempting juvenile reinvestment of youthful fire offenders. Finally, the literature review focuses on basic research relevant to the treatment needs of adolescents who misuse fire. Unfortunately, few researchers have specifically investigated the effectiveness of programs that attempt to reinvest and alter abnormal and dangerous firesetting behavior in young people (Bell et al., 2018).

In legal terms, arson involves the deliberate and malicious setting of fire to property. In general terms, intentional firesetting behavior is considered an externalization of strain and is a learned behavior (Barreto & Boekamp, 2019). However, there exist conflicting views about why individuals, including adolescents, commit acts of intentional fire-starting (Becker et al., 2020). In many communities, leaders consider arson a violent offense and place all firesetters, including juveniles, into one distinct group (Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). For example, the idea of pyromania complicates the field of firesetting research. Some researchers have argued that arsonists, including adolescents, automatically identify with pyromaniacs and receive sexual gratification from fire starting (Beech, 2018).

A review of the literature details how arson was thought to be perpetrated by groups of males for political ambitions (Bradford & Dimock, 2019). During the early

modern period, from roughly 1500 to 1800, arson was identified as a dangerous political criminal act widely believed to be perpetrated by rival gangs to spread disruption and chaos by causing material and property damage (Bell et al., 2018). Historically, arsonists were thought to be recruited by foreign adversaries and paid money to use fire as a weapon of destruction (Bradford & Dimock, 2019). This viewpoint drove early research away from prevention and treatment methods because the immediate target or victim of the set fire had no connection to the perpetrator (Butler & Davies, 2020). Much evidence disproves this early conspiracy theory in modern research related to juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention (Campbell, 2021). Butler and Davies (2020) revealed that arsonists could be classified into three major groups within some relevant studies. Some researchers today argue that arsonists fit into three categories: arson-for-profit, lone firesetter, and gang-related firesetting (Campbell, 2021). In some literature, Arson-for-profit may result from pending bankruptcy, the desire to eliminate competition in business, the effort to combat urban blight by setting vacant buildings on fire, or attempts to handle labor conflicts or conceal criminal acts (Cox-Jones et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2019) explained that the lone firesetter operates in a solitary mindset in deliberate fire starting. Some literature has described this situation as involving revenge, pyromania, or a hero complex, as well as self-pleasure and gratification (Dadds & Fraser, (2019). In group firesetting, the easy explanation that has been historically portrayed involves setting fires for vandalism, rioting, and political messaging. Some juvenile firesetters only commit acts of intentional fire starting with other disruptive peers (Francis, 2019). Embedded in the early literature relevant to intentional firesetting is a misguided ideology that often disregards theories such as strain and social learning theory, which embrace

prevention and treatment rather than a more punitive reaction of simple and decisive incarceration (Faranda et al., 2021).

The historical perspective of the literature relevant to firesetting behavior, including adolescent fire-starting, details a change in direction from reactive, draconian measures of simple incarceration to the evolution of proactive prevention and treatment for the intentional juvenile firesetter (Faranda, 2018). With this new progressive ideology that embraces treatment and prevention over juvenile incarceration, the literature adopts social learning and general strain theories as fundamental elements in adolescent firesetting prevention and treatment.

In keeping with a proactive approach to examining why individuals set fires, strain theory addresses how a negative emotion can transform into juvenile firesetting behavior (Francis, 2019). Agnew and Kaufman (2019) explained that intentional firesetters could internalize a failure to achieve a positive life goal through their strain theory. Francis (2019) described the gaps between expectation and achievement relative to deliberate firesetting. The loss of something positively valued or a negative perception through the lens of a juvenile can lead to malicious fire play. Agnew and Kaufman's (2019) observations suggest that juvenile firesetting is inversely related to a failure to meet the desired life status. Agnew and Kaufman expressed a theory of intentional fire-starting causation through socioeconomic factors that aligned with the perception that the profit-making practices of banks, realtors, and insurance companies lead to the course of abandonment, gentrification, and neighborhood plight, which destabilizes and disrupts communities. This rhetoric can motivate adolescents to maliciously set fires to

externalize their internal strain of daily living in a repressed and socioeconomically challenged environment (Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019).

Those researching intentional fire starting by adolescents might now apply social learning theory and general strain theory to examine malicious firesetting (Glancy et al., 2018). Gannon and Barrowcliffe (2019) expressed that social learning theory indicates that various developmental experiences and expectations shape adolescents' propensity for firesetting. Gannon and Barrowcliffe demonstrated that learned behavior is a risk factor that can contribute to a more severe cause of juvenile firesetting. A link between social learning and adolescent firesetting emerges primarily when parents and guardians with heightened behavioral and emotional difficulties are studied. Modern theorists in the context of juvenile firesetting have correlated social learning theory and the adolescent misuse of fire to represent a release of aggression for a child suffering from prolonged humiliation at the hands of peers or custodians (Hall, 2019a). The existing research shows that negative social learning highly indicates a child's home environment and that enuresis is associated with intentional youthful fire-starting (Hall, 2019b). For example, a child who experiences humiliation due to continued belittling by a prominent parental figure may express frustration via disruptive behavior such as intentional firesetting.

Social learning theorists would approach adolescent fire starters as a manifestation of reinforcement contingencies and learning through intimidation, abuse, and neglect (Hardesty, 2021). Modern social learning theorists predict that learning may occur in positive reinforcement, or social learning may happen in a vicarious form of education, which places an adolescent at increased risk of firesetting behavior (Harvell et al., 2019).

When dissected using general strain theory and social learning theory, adolescent firesetting cannot be dismissed as childish (Lutze & Bell, 2020). Implementation of new treatments depends on recommendations derived from expanded research into juvenile firesetting, community training, and advanced specialized programs born from the ashes of set fires (D. L. Williams & Clements, 2019).

Social learning and strain theories are not limited to economic motivation in explaining why adults and juveniles choose arson as their vehicle of adaptation (Holton & Walsh, 2020). The theorist who studies intentional juvenile firesetting continues to make correlations between social learning and strain theories and how they can be used to explain fires set in retaliation for an injustice, real or imagined, that is perceived by the adolescent (Horsley, 2021). Using social learning and strain theories, it is possible to explain juvenile firesetting as adapting to acting out or going against social norms (Johnson, 2019). With social learning and strain theories, intentional youthful firesetting may be interpreted as a departure from and replacement of community-based goals with other antisocial quests that the juvenile delinquent chooses (Heath et al., 2019).

As a legal expression, intentional fire-starting is a willful and malicious burning of property involving many types of criminality (Harvell et al., 2019). However, in juvenile firesetting, most intentionally set fires may be associated with burning anything from woodlands to vehicles (Kratcoski et al., 2019). The reasons that malicious adolescent firesetting is complicated, as are the theories behind intentional acts of fire starting, involve the diverse and multifaceted makeup of those who commit such acts (Kuhnley et al., 2018). Moreover, it is not easy to find the root causes of intentional acts of firesetting, as many factors make it too complex to narrow down into one specific

narrative. By building upon the existing literature and conducting studies into the treatment and prevention of juvenile fire-starters, I attempted to promote positive social change by evaluating an adolescent firesetting treatment and prevention program.

The following section contains a review of related literature divided into subsections corresponding to different aspects of juvenile firesetting and how this phenomenon has continued to plague adolescents.

### **Research Strategy**

The literature review relied on various sources of information, primarily supplied by the Walden University library system. I researched the literature using the general terms "juvenile firesetting" and "juvenile arson." Moreover, I enhanced the literature search by using the words "youthful misuse of fire," "youth fire play intervention and prevention," and "clinical assessment of juvenile firesetters" and yielded supplemental results. Additional resources were found through the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, a virtual library that contains bibliographic information and abstracts for more than 23,000 collection resources and over 80,000 works, including all known Office of Justice Programs works, as well as the Criminal Justice Statistics Center, which collects and reports statistical data that allow for valid assessment of crime and the criminal justice process in California, including crimes by juveniles. The Burning Item Database maintained by the National Institute of Justice provides a central location for descriptions of the burning characteristics of everyday items, including articles intentionally set on fire by adults and adolescents. The US Fire Administration's database is dedicated to preventing firesetting by young people. The Juvenile Arson and Explosive Research and Intervention Center at the Burn Institute in San Diego have maintained records of

juveniles referred to its counseling program for over two decades. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the National Center for Juvenile Justice maintains a database of juvenile offenders and victims. I found no existing literature directly referring to an evaluation of the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetter Reinvestment and Prevention Program, nor any needs assessment tools giving a voice to adolescent firesetters who engage in this form of community-based reinvestment initiative. However, I found considerable literature on juvenile firesetting interventions and reinvestment ideology both within the United States and abroad.

I reviewed existing literature to identify thematic elements of knowledge regarding juvenile firesetting. I consulted experts from Walden University's School of Criminal Justice, Walden University's Office of Research and Doctoral Services, the Walden University Library, and the University's Writing Center staff members. I found guidance from professional colleagues in fire investigation, juvenile justice, community outreach, fire prevention, law enforcement, and social services. In addition, I reached out to adolescent psychologists and counselors, medical doctors, and subject-matter experts specializing in reinvestment ideology. I collected a compendium of research literature spanning 30 years to identify thematic elements, strengths, and weaknesses from theoretical and applied perspectives specific to the phenomenon of juvenile firesetting. Researchers and professionals, clinicians, fire services, the criminal justice system, law enforcement, and community stakeholders were instrumental to this study's purpose of promoting positive social change and identifying areas in juvenile firesetting reinvestment that need additional research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

General strain theory and social learning theory were used to form this study's theoretical framework. These theories are appropriate for understanding the experiences of juvenile firesetters, particularly those committed to the juvenile justice system (Roos & Ellison, 2019). Arson has the highest rate of juvenile involvement in all types of crimes perpetrated in the United States (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Within the academic inquiry into juvenile firesetting, Andrew Agnew's theory continues to be explored and built upon (Puri et al., 2019). The general strain theory can be applied to understand why a juvenile may resort to firesetting. For example, when an adolescent's characteristics that are commonly and harshly looked down upon by their peers, such as mental illness, are revealed, the resulting stigma adds to the youth's strain. It can externalize in intentional firesetting (Puri et al., 2019). Social learning theory often links juvenile firesetting and aggressive behavior. It continues to be expanded upon by researchers, as do general strain factors that influence the occurrence of juvenile firesetting (Sakheim et al., 2019). This research study extended the relationship between adolescent fire play and general strain and social learning theories, as strain and social learning can motivate an adolescent to turn to fire play to unburden their stress and mimic learned disruptive behavior (Prakash, 2021). This study's research is built upon previous academic works that successfully used these theories in qualitative investigations of juvenile fire offenders. The literature details a reoccurring theme: A study specific to the youthful misuse of fire cannot disregard the general strain and social learning theories (Santtila et al., 2020).

## **General Strain Theory**

General strain theory is relevant to the study of juvenile fire play and provides a social-psychological explanation of the externalization of juvenile delinquency (Smith & Natalier, 2021). General strain theory explains how stressors on developing adolescents can externalize in the strain or act of firesetting (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). General strain theory focuses on juveniles' inability to achieve perceived goals, which results in tension (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). Agnew and Kaufman (2019) indicated that three types of strain lead to juvenile delinquent coping: the death of someone or the loss of something important to a juvenile's stability, a harmful experience such as child abuse, and failure to achieve positive custodial stimulus. Recent studies by Slavkin and Fineman (2020) built upon previous research by Agnew and Kaufman (2019) and found that these strains are relevant to the youthful misuse of fire. The human experience leads to variations in externalization based on individuals' unique negative experiences, resulting in juveniles sometimes using unorthodox coping methods in the form of intentional and destructive fire play (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). General strain theory identifies juveniles' home environments as high-strain environments leading to malicious firesetting behavior (Agnew, 1992, 2013; Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). These high-level strains occur more frequently in households where abuse and neglect flourish compared to families that do not identify with abuse and neglect, are often trait-dependent, and can occur for short and long periods (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020).

A juvenile who identifies with the loss of a prominent family caregiver is more likely to engage in deviant coping or externalized aggression and fire play behavior than a juvenile who maintains the support of a family matriarch and whose environment is

conducive to custodial nurturing (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Likewise, children identifying as introverted with low self-esteem and poor social coping skills are more likely to exhibit abnormal firesetting behavior to cope with strains (Smith & Natalier, 2021). Research conducted by Slavkin and Fineman (2020) built upon general strain theory and detailed how male and female juveniles cope with pressures differently. As a result, they externalize firesetting behavior differently. Female youthful fire offenders make up a small percentage of juvenile arsonists. Still, they identify with a greater prevalence of depression and psychosis and a higher incidence of maltreatment and sexual abuse than non-arsonist adolescent females, juvenile male arsonists, and juvenile male non-arsonists (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). The sample frame for this research study and previous inquiries into juvenile firesetting was affected by this finding. This study's purposeful sampling resulted in more parents or guardians of male juvenile firesetters being recommended for inclusion in this particular study.

General strain theory provides three explanations for why some juveniles are more likely than others to commit delinquent acts when dealing with strain (Agnew, 1992, 2013; Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). First, some children do not cope rationally with pressure (Barreto & Bockamp, 2019). Second, some children are inclined to commit illegal activity (Ahrens & Evarts, 2020). Third, other children are developmentally challenged, have low intelligence, or lack problem-solving skills (Beech, 2018). Criminal coping is simple, requires low expectations and little thinking, and often has immediate results (Becker et al., 2020). Young fire offenders employ coping this way and are likely to use drugs and alcohol as alternative coping mechanisms, often contributing to their firesetting tendencies (Yaghi, 2019). An adolescent with abnormal firesetting tendencies

is more likely to associate with delinquent peers and engage in aggressive deviant misuse of fire to cope with this strain than an adolescent with a sound support system and close family support (Steppe, 2018).

General strain theory predicts that some children use deviant behavior to find companionship, acceptance, or access to a custodial role model (Roos & Ellison, 2019). Losing a prominent custodial figure increases the strain upon a juvenile, resulting in the internalization of trauma and limiting psychosocial development (Sakheim et al., 2019). According to general strain theory, minors who engage in firesetting behavior exhibit various symptoms, many of which do not conform to conventional approaches (Steppe, 2018). Of significance, themes continue to emerge from studying children who engage in intentional fire play and their relationship to underdeveloped brains (Santtila et al., 2020). General strain theory predicts that children exhibiting firesetting tendencies remain at high risk for behavioral problems and internalizing stress (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020).

Relevant findings regarding general strain theory build on Agnew's (1992) actual results. Researchers have investigated whether forms of general strain theory play significant roles in explaining young fire offenders (Barreto & Boekamp, 2019; Chen et al., 2019; Kolko, 2020; Lambie et al., 2020). The findings of these researchers indicate that general strain theory applies to early childhood development and can provide critical guidance to reinvestment and prevention efforts to correct abnormal juvenile firesetting behavior (Chen et al., 2019). General strain theory is essential to explaining how numerous maladaptive life-changing events experienced by maturing adolescents lead to behavioral traits and psychosocial disabilities, including domestic violence, depression, and antisocial behavior (Kolko, 2020). The general strain theory applies to this research

study because children experiencing strain are more likely than other children who do not identify with strain to externalize problems in the form of malicious fire play (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020).

### **Social Learning Theory**

According to social learning theory, crime is a learned behavior crafted through social interactions (Steppe, 2018). Social learning theory has evolved since first formulated in 1963, and through academic findings that address cognitive control, the original work was modified in 1986 and renamed Social Cognitive Theory (Bradford & Dimock, 2019). Decades later, as insights have emerged regarding how juveniles become exposed to behavioral and antisocial influences within communities, this theory remains relevant to this study's work to understand juvenile firesetting and custodial impact when attempting reinvestment (Cox-Jones et al., 2020). In addition, the driving force behind criminality is intimidation, according to social learning theory (Pratt et al., 2019).

Bandura (1977) first described social learning theory to explain continuous and relevant behavior related to socioeconomic makeup. Social learning theorists have noted that concepts of the theory pertinent to juvenile delinquency include differential reinforcement or learning through a schedule of rewards and punishments and intimidation, a behavior learned through observation and modeling peers (Chen et al., 2019). According to social learning theory, people learn by observation and experience (Steppe, 2018). Social learning theorists have argued that human beings do not inherit knowledge at birth; instead, an individual's behavior develops due to learning during their journey through life (Pratt et al., 2019). Lutze and Bell (2020) inform us that learning occurs through a multilevel observation process of perception, retention, reproduction,

and motivation. First, humans intentionally become aware of behaving (Chen et al., 2019). Through retention, cognitive abilities allow for repetitive responses in which observation motivates motor reproduction or conversion of thoughts into actions (Lutze & Bell, 2020). As a result, an individual is likely to repeat conduct that receives continued reinforcement through reward or avoidance and unlikely to repeat behavior that attracts punishment (Pratt et al., 2019).

Different reinforcement is at the center of social learning theory, in which an individual's mental formation of habitual behavioral patterns directly influences misbehavior (Lutze & Bell, 2020). Juveniles' learned social behaviors emerge from their social groups (Pratt et al., 2019). Adolescents' sense of self-efficacy regarding individual situations can derive from verbal influences, personal influences, and overt and bodily experiences (Roos & Ellison, 2019). Adolescents learn to behave when observing a parent or guardian by identifying reinforcement or punishment of delinquency within their unique socioeconomic community (Pratt et al., 2019). According to social learning theory, juveniles learn different responses by observing others (Lutze & Bell, 2020).

Social learning theory focuses on how external and internal human experiences shape adolescents' lives and facilitate positive and negative life experiences (D. L. Williams & Clements, 2019). This focus indicates that human development occurs early in a juvenile's life (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). Social learning theory aids in understanding the development of young fire offenders (Lutze & Ball, 2020). The approach can aid the assessment of a young fire offender's strengths and weaknesses and help identify contributions to the abnormal firesetting tendencies of such an offender (Zipper & Wilcox, 2021).

Social learning theory suggests that adolescent firesetters feel no bond to society and, as a result, are at greater risk of setting intentional fires than adolescents who adapt to social norms (Lutze & Bell, 2020). Adolescents who misuse fire have revealed peer pressure as the primary reason for their firesetting, accompanied by rage and aggression (Zipper & Wilcox, 2021). Social learning theorists explain that adolescents who misuse fire and are motivated by aggression engage in more destructive early-onset fire play than adolescents who engage in firesetting out of curiosity (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). In general social learning theory predicts that juveniles with greater exposure to delinquent role models look more favorably toward this destructive behavior (Pratt et al., 2019). Young offenders who deliberately set fires pose a particular problem for the juvenile justice system (Steppe, 2018). Adults often excuse the antisocial behavior of these young firesetters because of a mistaken perception that such fires are accidents or result from childhood curiosity (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). Including social learning theory as part of the theoretical framework of this study will allow the researcher to avoid this mistaken perception and to consider real treatment possibilities to address the aggression and rejection of social norms that drive the systematic antisocial behavior of young people who misuse fire.

Social learning theory indicates that delinquent behavior in adolescents occurs when the standards and social norms that allow individuals to adhere to society's rules are either absent or severely diminished (Lutze & Bell, 2020). In addition, children who do not experience nurturing, trust, and healthy love early in life face learning challenges throughout adolescence and adulthood (Pratt et al., 2019).

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **History of Juvenile Justice in North Carolina**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, before establishing a juvenile justice system in North Carolina, adolescents aged 16 years and older were treated as adults by the state's criminal justice system (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reformers known as "child savers" led a progressive reinvestment movement (Santtila et al., 2020). As a result, the Probation Courts Act of 1915 established a separate court system for juveniles in North Carolina (NCCALJ, 2019). As Williams and Morrow (2019) explain, this legislation embodied a new progressive way of handling juvenile delinquents by using probation officers to provide separate court proceedings for young offenders and remanding young offenders to state and county reinvestment programs, known as "trade schools." However, it was not until 1919 that the state officially separated adult criminal court proceedings from the newly established juvenile justice system (Prakash, 2021).

The adult and juvenile justice systems differ in that the adult system focuses on incarceration, punishment, and mediation. Still, the direction of the juvenile system is reinvestment and prevention (NCCALJ, 2019). Operating under the principle of "parens patriae," the juvenile courts have greater social control over the lives of the adolescents they are responsible for and can implement best practices to meet the needs of adolescents. This can be accomplished by utilizing intervention and prevention strategies that align with reinvestment ideology, such as rehabilitating young fire offenders (NCCALJ, 2019).

The development of the modern approach to juvenile justice eventually led to more progressive juvenile reinvestment legislation in North Carolina, which came into

effect on December 1, 2019 (NCCALJ, 2019). A young offender arrested for a crime in North Carolina before December 1, 2019, was charged as an adult (NCCALJ, 2019). Often such a young offender would have been detained in the general county jail population with adults (Umamaheswar, 2021). This treatment exposed the young offender to sexual violence, aggression, and detrimental peer influence and encouraged them to learn antisocial behavior (Wincup, 2020). Often, the parents or guardians of young offenders were not informed that their children had been arrested and jailed (Yaghi, 2019). The resulting criminal cases generally proceeded without any requirements for notification of parents or guardians (Wincup, 2020). A young offender would have been tried in adult criminal court and, if convicted, processed under adult sentencing guidelines and sentenced to incarceration in an adult prison. A conviction often worsens their general strain, adding to their negative social learning and exposing them to physical violence. This criminal conviction results in the juvenile being branded for life as a convicted felon, limiting their access to education and employment. Moreover, removing from them positive socioeconomic potential and community involvement (Umamaheswar, 2021).

North Carolina was unusual in its treatment of juvenile delinquency during this period (NCCALJ, 2019). In contrast, 42 states and the District of Columbia set the age of criminal responsibility at 18 years, resulting in 16- and 17-year-olds being tried within the juvenile justice system. Before December 1, 2019, all collateral consequences applicable to adult offenders in North Carolina also applied to the state's juvenile offenders (NCCALJ, 2019).

Before December 1, 2019, a resident of a state other than North Carolina younger than 16 years and accused of committing a felony that would constitute a crime if committed by an adult was referred to the juvenile justice system (NCCALJ, 2019). A juvenile court counselor then initiated a preliminary review of the criminal complaint to determine whether diversion to the juvenile system or enhancement into the adult system was warranted (Steppe, 2018). In keeping with juvenile reinvestment best practices, the evaluation would have involved interviews with the complainant, the victim, and the young offender's parents or guardians (Umamaheswar, 2021).

In general, a standard criminal process followed by all states is that offenses are not divertible if charges include murder, rape, sexual crimes, and other serious crimes designated by law (Wincup, 2020). However, all other crimes are typically diverted as long as juvenile offenders and their parents and guardians comply with their diversion plans (Umamaheswar, 2020). Such a plan is generally adequate for up to 6 months and requires counseling and periodic review to ensure the compliance of the young offender and their parents or guardians (NCCALJ, 2019). If diversion fails for a given case, the case is enhanced in the adult criminal justice system. However, if diversion succeeds, the case is closed and sealed, and no stigma of criminality becomes attached to the child (Umamaheswar, 2021).

A review of data from the North Carolina Division of Adult Correctional and Juvenile Justice from 2008 to 2011 revealed that 21% of complaints were diverted, and 18% were closed immediately upon further investigation (NCCALJ, 2019). Furthermore, 76% of complaints diverted did not require additional reinvestment through the juvenile or adult justice systems and often resulted in positive life outcomes (NCCALJ, 2019). In

contrast, North Carolina juvenile offenders who received probation continued to recidivate higher than those who received juvenile reinvestment instead of conviction and probation (Tedeschi & Ford, 2021).

In terms of victimology, juvenile diversion does not diminish a complainant's point of view (Wincup, 2020). If a juvenile counselor or complainant feels that a young offender is beyond reinvestment and that juvenile diversion will not help, they can file a request to prosecute, which a judge rules on (Williams & Morrow, 2019). Tedeschi and Ford's (2021) data indicated that North Carolina's treatment of young offenders before December 1, 2019, was inconsistent with reducing crime and promoting community quality of life. Moreover, North Carolina's data were consistent with national data indicating that recidivism rates remained higher among juveniles prosecuted within the adult system than those who received juvenile diversion and reinvestment (Kratcoski et al., 2019). Evidence showing positive adolescent reinvestment outcomes through rehabilitation or incarceration presented by (Sakheim et al., 2019) suggests that juvenile delinquents receive more supervision and more positive results if remanded within the juvenile justice system. Historically, young offenders, in general, entered the adult criminal justice system because of low-level offenses, which often resulted in a dismissal of charges or reduction of charges during incarceration (NCCALJ, 2019). A juvenile offender prosecuted within the adult system and subsequently released with reduced or no charges learns that disruption often results in no consequences. A significant prediction of social learning theory is that a lack of consequences often leads to recidivism (Pratt et al., 2019).

A study that compared minors arrested in New Jersey, where the age of criminal culpability was 18 years, with those in New York and North Carolina, where criminal culpability was 16 years, details that a young offender sentenced within the adult criminal justice system has an increased likelihood of recidivism (Sakheim et al., 2019).

Adolescents who committed identical crimes were more likely to be rearrested in New York and North Carolina than in New Jersey (NCCALJ, 2019). For violent crimes, rearrests were 39% more likely among young offenders processed through the adult system than those receiving juvenile reinvestment opportunities (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). The researchers ultimately found that adult criminal procedure did not deter young offenders from committing crimes (Wincup, 2020). Juvenile offenders cannot comprehend the consequences of their disruption and the associated statutory sentencing guidelines, which often prevent adults from committing or recommitting criminal acts (Roos & Ellison, 2019). A study of young offenders with known gang affiliations who receive reinvestment-based treatment made them aware of gang indoctrination and the dangers of peer influence; the recidivism rate is much lower among such offenders than among those who do not receive such treatment (Levin & Moll, 2020).

### **Providing Benefits to Juvenile Firesetters in North Carolina**

Findings reported in existing literature support raising the age of criminal culpability in North Carolina because reinvesting in the state's juveniles is likely to obtain more favorable outcomes from the juvenile justice system and lower the recidivism rate among young people (NCCALJ, 2019). Raising the age of criminal culpability from 16 to 18 years would likely reduce juvenile recidivism and overall crime and improve the community's quality of life (Juvenile Justice, 2021).

Levin and Moll (2020) described a 7.5% reduction in recidivism rates when youthful offenders were referred to juvenile reinvestment programs instead of being tried and sentenced within the adult criminal justice system. However, unlike reinvestment programs, the adult criminal justice system cannot implement youth-specific interventions or rehabilitation within custodial and community involvement (Levin & Moll, 2020).

Existing literature indicates that juvenile delinquents receive better supervision within the juvenile justice system than in the adult criminal court system (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). Such findings also indicate that charging young fire offenders as adults teaches youthful fire offenders that illegal acts have no repercussions—most juvenile fire offenders start with committing low-level malicious fire-starting offenses. As a result, their charges are generally reduced or eliminated (Santtila et al., 2020). In addition, prosecuting young fire offenders in the adult system does not deter them from malicious firesetting because of their lack of maturity and cognitive ability (Kuhns, 2019). However, some have continued to assert that prosecuting juvenile offenders in the adult system deters future criminal activity, including malicious firesetting (Steppe, 2018).

Some have suggested that raising the age of criminal culpability would lead to more recruitment of young people into criminal gangs (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). However, Juvenile Justice (2021) reported that only 7%–8% of all young offenders identified as belonging to a gang. Moreover, statistical data for 2009–2016 indicate that only 20 individuals were alleged to have perpetrated a gang-related crime within the North Carolina juvenile justice system (NCCALJ, 2019). In addition, when individuals enter the North Carolina juvenile justice system, they receive gang awareness education,

intervention, and treatment for substance abuse and domestic violence (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Those processed within the adult system have no access to these critical reinvestment programs (Umamaheswar, 2021). Adolescents involved in a gang are thus likely to do better in the juvenile system with its reinvestment programs than in the adult system with high recidivism rates (NCCALJ, 2019).

Built-in protection of North Carolina's communities against violent juvenile offenders includes requiring young offenders charged with severe felonies to be tried as adults (NCCALJ, 2019). The state also has the right to transfer a violent juvenile from the juvenile system into the adult system when appropriate—furthering support for the argument that raising the age of criminal culpability from 16 to 18 years has improved, and will continue to improve, overall community safety in North Carolina (Juvenile Justice, 2021).

North Carolina has produced and will continue to create significant economic benefits for all state citizens (NCCALJ, 2019). Continued cost savings have resulted from reduced recidivism, eliminating future costs associated with young offenders who transition into the adult system and ultimately increasing the lifetime earnings of adolescents who do not bear adult criminal records (Williams & Morrow, 2019).

Raising the age of criminal culpability can also reduce the cost of incarcerating juveniles, which can be substantial. For example, the North Carolina Foothills Correctional Institution houses children and adult female offenders (Steinberg & Lassiter, 2020). The North Carolina Foothills Correctional Institutional must be locked down every time a juvenile offender moves around within the facility, leading to additional staffing costs. A cost-benefit analysis ordered by the North Carolina General Assembly

indicated that raising the age of criminal culpability within the state of North Carolina would save over \$44,000,000 a year in the running of juvenile detention facilities (NCCALJ, 2019). Because the average cost of incarcerating a juvenile was roughly \$125,000 per year, the reduction in committals had and would continue to yield significant savings (NCCALJ, 2019). In addition, the money saved could now be redirected from building incarceration centers into positive social change through juvenile reinvestment programs (Steinberg & Lassiter, 2020).

These neuropsychological findings have significant implications for juvenile justice system policy and society's response to children who misuse fire (Santtila et al., 2020). For example, suppose the relative immaturity of a 16- or 17-year-old's brain prevents them from controlling their impulses. In that case, they should be less culpable for their actions than an adult who can understand right from wrong yet choose to act criminally anyway (Sakheim et al., 2019). Most adolescents who exhibit antisocial fireplay and receive juvenile reinvestment treatment ultimately mature out of their criminality and often become productive, law-abiding adults (Luna & Wright, 2021).

Findings reported in existing literature indicate that a model based on the lessons of developmental psychology is more effective at reducing recidivism among young fire offenders than a draconian criminal justice model that favors incarceration.

### **Juvenile Justice Through Reinvestment**

Although some states have continued to treat juvenile offenders as adults, North Carolina has redirected resources based on science, indicating that juveniles' brains are not fully developed, which causes them to engage in risky behavior. Young people's neurobiological deficits increase their strain and enhance social learning through reward

and punishment sensations that govern their self-regulation and impulse control.

Although many juveniles appear to be cognitively adults, their ability to regulate their behavior is minimal. Young people respond to peer influence more than adults and have less capacity to weigh the long-term consequences of actions. Adolescents are more susceptible to rewards, less able to control impulsive behaviors, and less responsive to threats of criminal prosecution than adults (Luna & Wright, 2021).

The statistical data provided in the literature review details a conservative view of reality because fires have tended to be underreported, particularly those involving malicious fire play by juveniles. The underreporting of juvenile fire-related incidents has remained challenging to assess, with one estimate indicating that about 11 times more fires involving young offenders are unreported than are reported (Sakheim et al., 2019). Inconsistent capturing of available data in the National Fire Incident Reporting System has complicated the adolescent firesetter problem (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). In addition, many parents and guardians have remained unaware of their children's abnormal firesetting tendencies: Faranda (2018) concluded that only two-thirds of parents and guardians of children who had maliciously set fires were aware of the fact.

Firesetting is a common area of curiosity for adolescents that often matures into an abnormal firesetting tendency if specific positive socioeconomic and cognitive characteristics do not develop within a healthy family and community environment (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). A study conducted by Perrin-Wallqvist and Norlander (2020) interviewed 95 juveniles about their fire play histories and found that 70% of the male juveniles and 44% of the female youths had engaged in firesetting activity.

Researchers have identified characteristics common to juvenile firesetters aged 9–12

years; this behavior typically peaks between 13 and 14 years of age (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). Moreover, firesetting can begin as young as two years and extend throughout adolescence and adulthood (Hardesty & Gayton, 2021).

It is referenced that adolescents who misuse fire share similar behavioral trends to those juveniles diagnosed with conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder (Prakash, 2021). According to Becker et al. (2020) and Martin et al. (2019), all three of these behavioral trends share an advanced level of antisocial behavior. Moreover, adolescents with conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder exhibit more severe antisocial behavior, drug abuse, addiction, and engagement in suicidal actions (Prakash, 2021). They also possess firesetting tendencies, and such adolescents have the lowest educational achievement relative to their non-firesetting peers (Martin et al., 2019).

Dadds and Fraser (2019) studied young fire offenders on the broad spectrum between minor or insignificant firesetting and severe or catastrophic misuse of fire. Moreover, these researchers found that compared to adolescents who commit minor acts of fire misuse, if compounded by devastating family abuse, it results in youth having inadequate superego functioning, higher than average levels of sexual excitement, introversion, and poor social awareness (Dadds & Fraser). In addition, this superego can externally exhibit rage resulting from humiliation, and these adolescents are documented to partake in cruelty to animals (Martin et al., 2019). Moreover, severe or catastrophic juvenile firesetters reveal intense anger and resentment about parental rejection, abuse, or emotional neglect (Prakash, 2021).

Dadds and Fraser (2019) also identified significant differences based on gender and reported a greater degree that adolescent males set more fires than juvenile females.

Male adolescents continued abnormal firesetting behavior into adulthood, which few female adolescents did (Dadds & Fraser, 2019). Strain documented among the male adolescents in the study by Dadds and Fraser details a relationship between the misuse of fire by adolescents to parental stress, antisocial behavior, hyperactivity, animal cruelty, and thrill-seeking. The strain for female adolescents in the Dadds and Fraser study was related to parental pressure, antisocial behavior, depression and anxiety, and exposure to sexual abuse. The male adolescents tended to have higher levels of antisocial behavior than the female adolescents, and the female adolescents tended to have higher levels of sexual abuse, substance abuse, and harmful and reckless sexual activity than the male adolescents (Dadds & Fraser, 2019).

Another way to look at juvenile firesetters is through the lens of risk factors rather than characteristics (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). Looking through the lens of risk factors focuses not on a specific adolescent's attributes but on what is happening in that adolescent's life that causes them to engage in abnormal or risky fire play (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). Young people's risk factors associated with misuse of fire fall into three main domains: learning experiences and cues, personal repertoires, and influences and stressors due to parents and guardians (Smith & Natalier, 2021). Multiple variables within each domain put a juvenile at risk of abnormal firesetting tendencies (Kolko & Kazdin, 2021). The variables associated with experience and cues are early modeling by household members, curiosity and fire development, direct exposure to fire or combustible materials, and lack of available positive role models. The variables associated with personal repertoire include limited fire safety skills, lack of awareness of fire danger, interpersonal ineffectiveness, and lack of social skills. Finally, the variables

associated with influence and stressors due to parents and guardians are lack of adult supervision, monitoring, parental involvement; parental pathology; and external stressors (Kazdin & Kolko, 2019).

Faranda (2018), Faranda et al. (2019), and Faranda et al. (2021) found that the juvenile firesetter phenomenon transcends race. The findings of these studies suggest that children aged 9–11 years who attend elementary school and reside in single-parent homes are more likely to engage in abnormal firesetting behavior (Prakash, 2021). According to these findings, the common denominator is that these juveniles set fires, and their method of choice is to use matches and lighters (Puri et al., 2019). This destructive behavior results from stressors or learned behavior through home or community exposure to antisocial norms (Santtila et al., 2020).

A typical medical consequence for young fire offenders is traumatic burn injury; such injuries often require intensive care in a hospital setting and lead to other issues such as posttraumatic stress disorder and depression (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). More often than not, arson affects children under the age of 5 years, who are less mobile than other children and possess less knowledge about the causes and development of fire (Smith & Natalier, 2021). Such children often hide from set fires under beds or in closets; their small body size also places them at the most significant risk of injury from fire (Yaghi, 2019). Preschoolers themselves contribute to about 20% of adolescent deaths in cases where juvenile firesetting is a listed cause (Greenberg & Keane, 2019).

Researchers studying the phenomenon of malicious firesetting by juvenile delinquents have consistently linked young fire offenders to adverse outcomes (Roos & Ellison, 2019). For example, above-average impairment of cognitive ability relevant to

behavior and function leads to more minor regular behavioral and less emotional strengthening, identified by many within the juvenile justice community to be present among youthful fire offenders (Roos& Ellison, 2019). This above-average impairment of cognitive ability relevant to behavior and function hampers healthy adolescent development and leads to aggression and abnormal firesetting behavior (Horsley, 2021, pp. 77–90).

### **Juvenile Firesetting Behavior**

Male adolescents tend to set fires out of curiosity, externalize strain, and the need to manifest a disruptive learned behavior, whereas female adolescents tend to set fires to seek excitement (Sakheim et al., 2019). Children aged eight or younger generally set fires because of a family crisis or abuse (Prakash, 2021). Children aged 9–11 exhibit firesetting behavior because of experimentation, conflict, or family strain (Peters & Freeman, 2020). Moreover, adolescents aged 11–17 manifest advanced psychological turmoil through fire play, misuse, and intentional firesetting (Santtila et al., 2020).

Many researchers have studied the motivations for firesetting adolescents based on the severity of the adolescents' behavior (Steppe, 2018). Juvenile firesetters frequently set fires, and their behavior is intentional and often concealed (Puri et al., 2019). Overall, researchers have identified many motives of adolescent firesetters; those identified consistently include curiosity, crying for help, delinquency, family crisis, severe emotional disturbance, aggression, and revenge (Bell et al., 2018). Heath et al. (2019) reviewed existing literature and found that juveniles who set fires are likelier than those who do not display severely exaggerated antisocial behavior. In keeping with the best practices in juvenile firesetting prevention and rehabilitation, today's academic

researchers must acknowledge the genuine psychiatric emergency associated with malicious youthful firesetting (Johnson, 2019). A reoccurring theme among the juvenile firesetting literature details rehabilitation over incarceration. Many studies promise positive social change by lowering adolescent recidivism through community-based programs. In the context of this study, “An evaluation of community-based juvenile firesetting programs through the custodial lens,” few researchers have evaluated the outcomes of such firesetting and intervention programs.

Pratt et al. (2019) and Prakash (2021) reported that juveniles referred to mental health professionals for delinquent antisocial fire-starting behavior continued to exhibit malicious firesetting tendencies if not successfully treated within a community-based juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program.

As adolescents mature through their developmental stages, their fire play becomes more externalized by family crises or strain. This externalization of an impulse to set fires typically results from significant emotional neglect or physical abuse (Sakheim et al., 2019). When the family nuclei of these young fire offenders are saturated in crisis or strain, this often indicates that the parents or guardians of the adolescent themselves exhibit higher-than-normal levels of antisocial behavior (Glancy et al., 2018). The study by Glancy details sources of strain for juvenile firesetters, including a parent or guardian suffering from depression, dysfunction resulting from psychiatric symptoms, and low income. These parental and guardian afflictions of depression and psychiatric symptoms often result in lower levels of affection shown to the child by their custodian or caregiver. They are often overshadowed by domestic abuse at home (Glancy et al., 2018). As a result, a child who engages in fire play in preschool has a higher risk of severe child or

family psychopathology. This malicious fireplay is often the result of a diagnosis of an oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder (Beech, 2018).

Common behavioral themes specific to the adolescent misuse of fire include delinquency, hyperactivity, substance and alcohol abuse, animal cruelty, aggression, and hostility (Becker et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2019; Glancy et al., 2018; Kolko & Kazdin, 2021; Puri et al., 2019; Santtila et al., 2020; Showers & Pickrell, 2019; Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Emotional characteristics of young fire offenders are wide-ranging and consist of depression, control, and power issues, distortion of self-perception, need for autonomy and independence, feelings of powerlessness, and feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem (Jones et al., 2021; Pinsonneault 2020; Sakheim et al., 2019; Santtila et al., 2020; Zipper & Wilcox, 2021). Some deficiencies in social characteristics are indicative of adolescents who misuse fire; these include a lack of verbal communication skills and social problem-solving skills, shyness, and inability to deal with peer rejection (Chen et al., 2019; Pinsonneault, 2020; Sakheim et al., 2019; Zipper & Wilcox, 2021). Faranda et al. (2019) found that parents of juvenile firesetters indicated that their children had attention deficit disorder, abnormal delinquent behavioral tendencies, and aggressive mannerisms.

Externalizing is used to describe a problem with the self-control of emotions and behaviors (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). A juvenile with an externalizing disorder directs aggressive behavior outwardly at others instead of keeping their aggression inward or internalized (Prakash, 2021). A study by Faranda et al. (2019) reported that youthful fire offenders exhibit a higher rate of externalization. In addition, young fire offenders project

strange behavior over the internalization of strain and negative social learning, compounded by a typical adolescent misunderstanding of the nature of fire behavior.

In a study, Prakash (2021) said that juvenile fire offenders behave abnormally by externalizing their emotions and conflicts by misusing fire. Prakash's conclusions are consistent with the findings of Heath et al. (2019), who studied 204 children in a psychiatric outpatient clinic and found similar externalizing through fire play. A study by Prakash (2019) that reviewed national survey data of youthful offenders of fire reported that adolescent fire play is overrepresented among those with conduct disorder and oppositional defiance disorder. Prakash (2019) said that more male youth are afflicted with conduct disorder and oppositional defiance disorder and engage in more malicious fire play than similar adolescent females. Firesetters exhibit antisocial behavior at a young age, indicating an inability to interact appropriately in a community environment. A study by Luna and Wright (2021) reports that youthful fire offenders referred to an adolescent outpatient psychiatric clinic identify with a higher degree of externalization or acting out combined with above-average levels of emotional disturbance than non-firesetting youth.

Researchers in adolescent fire play have argued that misuse of fire is typical among young people with multiple clinical and behavioral problems; other internalized behaviors, such as depression, and externalized behaviors, such as lawbreaking and aggression, are also common among adolescent firesetters (Luna & Wright, 2021). For example, adolescents who internalize their feelings may exhibit high levels of depression, and those who externalize their feelings demonstrate increased aggression toward others.

Kolko and Kazdin (2021) categorized adolescents who externalize aggression by acting out as delinquent firesetters. These researchers concluded that juvenile firesetters are at-risk of high antisocial and behavioral problems, including hostility and above-average aggression. Furthermore, the researchers described two antisocial behavior profiles among delinquent male adolescent firesetters: the stealer group, petty thief and shoplifter, and the aggressor. Kolko and Kazdin detail that the stealer group includes adolescents with firesetting tendencies. These researchers suggested that juvenile firesetting occurs at the end of a sequence of delinquent behaviors that provide for lying and stealing.

Kwon et al. (2019) investigated the makeup of juvenile firesetters' family nuclei and found that they come from emotionally distant families; their parents and guardians use unorthodox and antisocial parenting methods. Because families of young fire offenders are emotionally distant and provide the offenders with unpredictable upbringings, the social learning theory model of positive and negative reinforcement remains a critical influence on firesetting behavior among children. Yoo and Lee (2020) studied adolescent delinquent behavior. They found that juveniles who exhibited aggressive antisocial tendencies failed to form foundations of love and trust and continued through life suffering above-average strain compared to adolescents who experienced overt love and trust in a healthy family setting. The findings of Yoo and Lee (2020) indicate that an expression of delinquent behavior before 12 years predicts future criminality and juvenile firesetting. This affliction often crosses over into an adult life of arson.

Yoo and Lee (2020) also found that parents and guardians rated juvenile firesetters higher than non-firesetters on a behavioral checklist rating delinquent actions. The parent/guardian rating scale of Francis (2019), who built on the work of Kuhnley et al. (2018), revealed that parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters reported significantly higher scores in the categories of stealing, truancy, property destruction, shoplifting, and deception than did the parents and guardians of non-firesetters. Agnew (2013), Agnew and Kaufman (2019), Francis, Yoo, and Lee all described the onset of a strain model; the population for their studies consisted of male adolescents enrolled in inner-city schools in Grades 4–7. They found that juveniles reached different stages of delinquency as they developed, and those juvenile firesetters reached the most severe stage. The first stage, the authority conflict stage, occurs in adolescents under the age of 12 years and involves disruptive tendencies associated with oppositional defiant disorder, including misuse of fire. The next step, the covert stage, involves secret acts of criminality such as shoplifting, antisocial and disruptive conduct such as setting fires, and delinquent behavior, including automobile theft and armed robbery. The characterization of adolescent firesetting as a covert act by Kuhnley et al. (2018) is consistent with general strain theory and other research findings (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). The final stage, the overt step, involves aggression toward others, physical fighting, and violent acts such as taking property forcibly from others, burning animals, and setting fires to hurt or kill people (Steppe, 2018).

### **Juvenile Firesetting as a Community-Based Problem**

The human experience is intertwined within a culture of acceptable social norms that determine excellent, deviant, and disruptive behavior. According to social norms,

adolescents who exhibit unacceptable behavior may experience personal and emotional problems. These problems, if left untreated, may internalize as severe mental illness or externalize in the form of malicious fire play (Roos & Ellison, 2019). More than half of all rebellious, disorderly youth develop into antisocial functioning adults after being exposed to the juvenile justice system and the adult justice system (Kuhns, 2019). A reoccurring theme within the available literature concerning juvenile firesetting details a conflict of interest between managing a minor's well-being and serving the best interests of society (Roos & Ellison, 2019).

Gannon and Barrowcliffe (2019) studied youthful fire offenders' individual and contextual characteristics. They identified differences in the treatment of young arsonists and the criminal justice system's use of pre-adjudication for immature firesetting intervention programs. The likelihood of incarceration depends on individuals' characteristics and the context in which community and local authorities operate intervention programs (Cox-Jones et al., 2020). Young offenders are heterogeneous and reflect the influences of a variety of subcultures. It is thus impossible to generalize one person's attributes to all group members—such as an ethnic group—because differences exist between the individuals making up any group (Collins et al., 2021). According to Gannon and Barrowcliffe (2019), adolescent fireplay researchers must examine community-based juvenile firesetting programs and evaluate individual agencies' policies and programs that work with court-referred or self-committed youthful firesetters.

Few researchers have formally evaluated community-based juvenile firesetting prevention and treatment programs (Roos & Ellison, 2019). Hence, there is a common but mistaken belief within the criminal justice system that adolescent firesetting is often

accidental or results from childhood curiosity. This often results in a dismissal of charges or an excuse not to prosecute (Sakheim et al., 2019). On the contrary, children and adolescents who engage in firesetting demonstrate more extreme dysfunction than other young offenders referred for psychiatric services (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). For example, compared with non-firesetting peers, the juveniles who misuse fire score significantly higher for rejection by parents or guardians, caretaker neglect, abuse, inadequate superego development, aggression, and revenge thinking. In addition, problems have emerged in attempts to differentiate malicious acts of firesetting from youthful fire play that is not deliberate (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020).

Trauma experienced by a child can lead to externalizing behavior throughout their adolescent years and into adulthood (Yaghi, 2019). Hall (2019a) correlated childhood trauma and adult disorganization. According to Hall, addressing childhood trauma thus addresses adult disorganization. The researcher Hall (2019b) argued that child abuse is not only a traumatic predictor of future antisocial firesetting tendencies; but that children witnessing any traumatic event can suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. The study by Hall reports that if not diagnosed and addressed, posttraumatic stress can lead to externalizing in the form of malicious fireplay that continues into adult life. A community-based firesetting intervention and prevention program can contribute to positive social change by emphasizing the unhealthy development of children exposed to abuse and those who have witnessed the traumatic deaths of prominent family members (Butler & Davies, 2020).

Parents and guardians—and the juvenile justice system—have continued to underemphasize and downplay the youthful misuse of fire (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020).

Pollack-Nelson et al. (2019) studied a sample of parents and guardians of adolescents attending a fire safety prevention and education workshop due to the adolescents' abnormal firesetting behavior. The questions asked by Smith and Natalier in their study of youthful fire offenders were specific to a participant's perceptions of their child's interest in and ability to use lighters and matches. Their child's awareness of fire risk, the availability of lighters and matches at home, and the lengths to which their child would go to acquire fire-starting materials. The Smith and Natalie study revealed compounding and reoccurring themes about why a child is remanded to a juvenile firesetting intervention program (Smith & Natalier, 2021).

Pollack-Nelson et al. (2019) reported that 25% of the fires associated with the sample resulted in injuries; one led to a fatality. Of the parents and guardians surveyed, 65% did not believe their children would engage in abnormal firesetting behavior; 61% claimed they could not use lighters and matches. Moreover, 85% said they took precautions to keep lighters and matches away from their children, despite the ability of the children to find the fire-starting and ignite materials. Finally, an important finding was that 84% of the participants were home when their children had ignited their fires. Moreover, 80% reported talking with their children about the dangers of setting a fire, revealing the false narrative many parents and guardians have about their children's knowledge and use of fire (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019).

A shortcoming within existing literature related to juvenile firesetting is a lack of cohesion. Studies conducted by Martin et al. (2019) on arson reports that previous inquiries include unrepresentative samples, such as young prisoners convicted of arson or emotionally disturbing fire offenses, but do not include all categories of intentional fire

starting (Martin et al., 2019). Researchers attempting to study juvenile firesetting have often employed inadequate designs, biased sampling, and unreliable participants (Papalia et al., 2019). Moreover, classifying all youthful fire offenders using one or two particular diagnoses, such as oppositional defiant disorder, risks a study's scientific reliability (Perks et al., 2019). For example, youthful offenders of fire with an oppositional defiant disorder have similar complex histories of abuse, neglect, and aggression compared to young fire offenders with the many conditions associated with general strain and social learning theory (Luna & Wright, 2021).

A group of criminal justice professionals produced the *North Carolina Juvenile Reinvestment Report*. They allow the state's juvenile justice system to expand its jurisdiction to include younger offenders and juvenile firesetters aged 16–17. The report details how this shift in policy would reduce crime and save taxpayers money (North Carolina Commission on the Administration of Law and Justice [NCCALJ], 2019). The collaboration's findings are backed by scientific research into adolescent brain development and years of recidivism data. *The North Carolina Juvenile Reinvestment Report* produced evidence that treatment in the juvenile justice system and community-based programs are far more effective at reducing juvenile crime than incarceration of juveniles in adult facilities (Greenberg & Keane, 2019). The reports' recommendations include placing more individuals in the juvenile justice system, improving community quality of life, and would produce economic benefits for juvenile delinquents, who would no longer carry the burden of criminal records for poor choices made when young (NCCALJ, 2019).

In the juvenile justice system and criminal procedural law, adjournment in contemplation of dismissal allows a court to defer the outcome of a defendant's case with the expectation that the defendant's charges will be expunged. Adjournment in contemplation of dismissal has numerous advantages over juvenile incarceration. It has remained a valuable tool for promoting reinvestment ideology (North Carolina Commission on the Administration of Law and Justice [NCCALJ], 2019). An adjournment in contemplation of dismissal provides for a complete release of charges in the interests of justice or reinvestment after some time—usually six months or less—as long as the defendant is not rearrested and completes a court-ordered action during the adjournment (NCCALJ, 2019). Although not a court ruling of innocence, such an adjournment does wipe a defendant's record clean by returning them to the status they held before their involvement in the criminal justice system (Criminal Procedure Act, 2020).

The legal definition of "arson" as a criminal act of property destruction and an "arsonist" as an individual perpetrating an illegal act of firesetting has also led to problems for scientific research (Lichtman, 2019). Types of arson depend on a combination of motive, characteristics, and legal concepts, including classifications that imply diminished mental capacity (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). Many researchers studying youthful fire play have faced the disadvantages of existing motive-driven categories. Because human intentions are difficult to measure, and juvenile firesetters present a variety of reasons for their actions, this has resulted in arbitrary and inconsistent classifications regarding juvenile firesetting (Prakash, 2021). For example, researchers have typically classified firesetters according to motives—such as aggression, revenge,

and jealousy—and various other characteristics, such as gender, age, and incarceration status (Yaghi, 2019). Biased samples reflect only a tiny percentage of the nation's firesetters (Puri et al., 2019). Typologies in firesetting are segregated into those with motives or goals and those without cause but remain problematic (Pollack-Nelson et al., 2019). Perhaps the biggest problem with existing classifications associated with firesetting is that they include unrelated factors, such as fire location and the material set on fire (Geller, 2018). In reality, attempting to classify firesetters is a poor research method that results in conflicting categories. As Geller (2018), Pollack-Nelson et al. (2019), and Levin and Moll (2020) suggested, a better approach is to categorize behaviors instead of individual materials set on fire by individual firesetters. Modern progressive ideology specific to youthful fire play suggests that any comprehensive classification of juvenile firesetting behavior should probably retain motive and include a multi-axis characterization of behavior (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Employing such a system would help researchers identify the reasons for acts of adolescent fire play, evaluate reinvestment programs, and facilitate treatment and prevention measures associated with the misuse of fire by young people (Kratcoski et al., 2019).

As Sakheim et al. (2019) and Horsley (2021) explained, the etiology of youthful misuse of fire has remained largely unknown, as have solutions to the prevention and reinvestment ideology specific to adolescents that misuse fire. In the context of this research study, this lack of knowledge indicates a need for program evaluation in the realm of community-based juvenile firesetting prevention and intervention programs.

## **Research Methods Employed in the Study of Firesetting**

This section describes existing literature that provides the scientific basis for early intervention and prevention programs for juvenile firesetters. The purpose of establishing the foundation for this need is to explain the importance of evaluating a community-based juvenile firesetters reinvestment program.

Researchers investigating the socioeconomic characteristics of delinquent youth have reported that juvenile firesetters typically come from disorganized family homes and often report experiencing parental abuse and neglect (Lipsey et al., 2020). For example, in 2019, 51% of those arrested for arson were under 18 years, nearly one-third were under 15 years, and 3% were under the age of 10 years (Butler & Davies, 2020). Watson (2020) explained that understanding a young person's history with fire is the basis for assessing their firesetting behavior and forming an effective intervention. In 2018, for the 8<sup>th</sup> year in a row, juvenile firesetters accounted for roughly half or more of those arrested for arson (Lipsey et al., 2020). Researchers have argued that a thorough understanding of juvenile firesetting, including why children and young people set fires, is key to curbing this destructive behavior and yielding positive outcomes through reinvestment rather than incarceration. However, perks et al. (2019) suggested that gaps in the research literature remained. Most apparent was the lack of sufficient systematic assessment of the scope of juvenile firesetting over time (Bradford & Dimock, 2019). In addition, there is a lack of adequate periodic evaluations of the many unique and often autonomous programs to help curtail juvenile firesetting (Roe-Sepowitz & Hickle, 2019). Many fire officials and law enforcement officers consider firesetting underreported, and no precise measurement exists specific to the prevention and intervention of juvenile

firesetting programs (Hardesty & Gayton, 2021). Roe-Sepowitz and Hickle (2019) suggested that using fire by juveniles is more than a product of curiosity. The study indicates that most children understand that fire can be an instrument of power and a weapon.

Any attempt to mitigate the destructive behavior associated with the misuse of fire by young people requires a thorough understanding of adolescent firesetting research methods. A reoccurring theme within the youthful abuse of fire literature is the need to conduct further research to advance knowledge of the dynamics associated with childlike firesetting behavior and the mechanics needed to evaluate, reevaluate, and guide community-based juvenile firesetting reinvestment programs.

There appears to be a recurring theme throughout existing literature that links juvenile firesetting behavior and aggression (Bradford & Dimock, 2019; Collins et al., 2021; Cox-Jones et al., 2020; Horsley, 2021; Johnson, 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Kolko, 2020; Kolko & Kazdin, 2021). A distinction exists between fire play or misuse and firesetting (Prakash, 2021). Both types of behavior may damage property and cause injury or death (Sharp & Hernandez, 2021). However, they differ in their intent and malice (Sakheim et al., 2019). Fire play includes an element of curiosity and fascination; although it often results in collateral damage, it is not inspired by malice (Horsley, 2021). On the other hand, firesetting involves willful actors misusing fire purposefully to achieve the desired result (Johnson, 2019). A recurring theme in case studies is the adolescent evolution from fire play or misuse to malicious firesetting (Bradford & Dimock, 2019; Collins et al., 2021; Cox-Jones et al., 2020; Horsley, 2021; Johnson, 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Kolko, 2020; Kolko & Kazdin, 2021).

Researchers have reported that fire play or misuse can lead to repetitive and chronic firesetting (Collins et al., 2021; Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019; Horsley, 2021; Kolko, 2020; Johnson, 2019; Jones et al., 2021). Firesetting represents a more critical threat to a community than fire play and often develops from general strain and social learning into community disruption (Sakheim et al., 2019).

Findings reported in existing literature indicate that malicious fire play should be a priority to minimize the occurrence, disruption, and destruction associated with fire play and adolescent firesetting (Kolko, 2020). Implementation of many community-based juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention programs has yet to include the means to evaluate the effectiveness of those programs (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Determining a program's effectiveness is costly and challenging (Steppe, 2018). Adolescent firesetting prevention and reform programs have been the most used intervention mechanisms for young fire offenders (Prakash, 2021). A recurring theme throughout existing literature is the necessity of evaluating these community-based juvenile firesetting programs (Juvenile Justice, 2021). Evaluation is a sound investment because it ensures that resources are not expended on programs that do not show results. A juvenile firesetting reinvestment program that undergoes appropriate evaluation and, if needed, realignment with best practices is more likely to prosper and yield positive outcomes when compared to a program that does not undergo evaluation.

Existing literature on adolescent fire offenders' treatment contributes to understanding essential aspects of adolescent fire misuse, especially the reoccurring themes of aggression, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, social learning theory, and general strain theory (Peters & Freeman, 2020). However, gaps in the

existing literature include those related to evaluating promising intervention and reinvestment programs specific to the pathology of adolescent firesetting.

### **Treatment for Juvenile Firesetting**

No characteristics are typical of juvenile firesetters, and the elements are complex (Prakash, 2021). The treatment they need is thus also complex (Puri et al., 2019). Most juvenile firesetter prevention and treatment initiatives involve more than teaching fire safety; they also incorporate psychological topics and treatments in community-based cognitive-behavioral therapy programs (Santtila et al., 2020). Such programs effectively alter and redirect abnormal adolescent firesetting behavior (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). Researchers have applied social learning theory and general strain theory to create community-based interventions employed at the level of children, their families, and their schools and incorporate all relevant juvenile justice stakeholders in the children's neighborhoods (Faranda et al., 2021). The community-based techniques should include peer mentoring, reading programs, social skill training, social therapy, and behavioral treatment. They require involvement and frequent communication among teachers, parents, law enforcement officers, juvenile justice system representatives, and fire service professionals (Lambie et al., 2020). In addition, the community-based model often improves interactions between children and their parents and guardians, which is relevant to reducing strain in the form of child abuse and neglect (Kratcoski et al., 2019).

Some researchers have found that juvenile firesetters involved in community-based treatment programs have more positive social outcomes than those juvenile firesetters not affiliated with such programs (Collins et al., 2021; Gannon & Barrowcliffe, 2019; Horsley, 2021; Johnson, 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Kolko, 2020). Unfortunately, few

researchers have studied the effectiveness of community-based adolescent firesetting prevention and reinvestment programs. Implementation of most intervention programs occurs at the community or state level, and no nationally recognized standard of intervention for adolescent firesetters has emerged (Pooley & Ferguson, 2020). However, Kolko (2020) did examine the effectiveness of a juvenile firesetter program in terms of recidivism. Kolko looked at three treatments for juvenile firesetters: social, behavioral therapy, fire safety education, and at-home visits from a counseling firefighter. The at-home visits treatment included one session at the firehouse about fire safety issues and a follow-up home visit. After one year, the groups that received social, behavioral therapy, and fire safety education had significantly less involvement in the criminal justice system and less abnormal firesetting activity than those that received a fire station and at-home visits.

Barreto and Boekamp (2019) described a significant gap in research on youthful fire offenders related to treatment protocols in community-based programs. Prior research studies used a group format, manualized protocols, and 18 hours of education and intervention therapy. The treatment improved adolescent fire competency and instilled positive behavioral changes and communication skills (Santtila et al., 2020). The treatment consisted of four sessions of fire safety education and 6 hours of peer support and family therapy; parents and guardians joined their children during the education sessions, sometimes in separate groups and sometimes together. With so many variables in play and so few empirical studies available, more research is warranted into aspects of adolescent firesetter reinvestment programs.

North Carolina has been at the forefront of treating adolescent firesetters (NCCALJ, 2019). The state has established funding for a continuum of care for juvenile firesetters and their families, including prevention education and tools for children, parents, and caregivers in community-based initiatives (NCCALJ, 2019). Mecklenburg County has developed a multidisciplinary team involved in treating adolescent fire offenders. The members of the team represent the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office, City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County law enforcement, City of Charlotte Police and the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County fire personnel, the Mecklenburg County District Attorney's Office, Mecklenburg County juvenile court counselors, Mecklenburg County child welfare officers, Mecklenburg County mental health providers, Mecklenburg County educators, and the North Carolina Department of Insurance (NCCALJ, 2019). In keeping with the community-based nature of the treatment, the team also includes representatives of not-for-profit groups and other socialization programs for those juveniles identified as at risk of firesetting (Steppe, 2018). Based on research and empirical analysis of youthful fire offenders, the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office utilizes a screening tool to decide how to treat and prevent juvenile firesetting (Johnson, 2019).

The screening tool includes a checklist and interview for a child's parent or guardian with fourteen interview questions (Pinsonneault, 2020). The response to each question is worth 1, 2, or 3 points (U.S. Fire Administration, 2020). In addition, the tool lists the criteria for the points immediately after each question (Levin & Moll, 2020). The screening document also allows the interviewer to write comments and observations (Pinsonneault, 2020). The sum of points for the child and the points for the parent or

guardian determines whether the child should stay within the reinvestment program or receive treatment from mental health professionals (U.S. Fire Administration, 2020). For example, if the child's score is less than 19 and the parent or guardian's score is less than 15, the child can receive reinvestment treatment (Levin & Moll, 2020). Otherwise, referral of the child to a mental health professional is recommended in conjunction with completing the standard juvenile firesetting program with modified specifications (Pinsonneault, 2020). Other communities throughout North Carolina have also adopted this screening tool for the same purpose (Juvenile Justice, 2021).

### **Summary**

Misuse of fire by juveniles is destructive and worthy of exploration within the relatively new realm of adolescent reinvestment ideology (U.S. Fire Administration, 2020). Unfortunately, children have remained overrepresented in acts of arson, and the problems associated with young people's misuse of fire can be tragic and costly for communities (Ahrens & Evarts, 2020). Many states have developed programs to work with juvenile firesetters (U.S. Fire Administration, 2020). However, only a few of these programs have undergone evaluation to determine their effectiveness in reducing recidivism and promoting positive social outcomes for adolescents who engage in abnormal firesetting (Peters & Freeman, 2020).

Chapter 3 presents the methodology utilized to study the youthful misuse of fire through the perceptions of the juvenile firesetters' parents or guardians. This academic inquiry will evaluate the program's effectiveness using generic qualitative research methods and thematic data analysis to identify if the adolescent firesetting intervention

and prevention program currently being utilized in the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, is working or requires a realignment or complete overhaul.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### **Introduction**

Chapters 1 and 2 detailed the impact of juvenile firesetting on the lives of young offenders and their families and the cost and disruption this phenomenon causes for offenders' communities. This study examined the effectiveness of a community-based juvenile firesetter intervention and prevention program that aims to reinvest in adolescent fire offenders. With this study, I looked through the lens of parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters taking part in the reinvestment program. Assessing the effectiveness of this program revealed what was working and what was not, allowing future researchers to build upon a working method to promote juvenile reinvestment. This chapter addresses the research design, role of the researcher, research methodology, and trustworthiness issues.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

For this qualitative study, a juvenile firesetting program was examined from the perspective of the youthful fire offenders' adult parents or guardians. Two research questions guided this generic qualitative study of a juvenile firesetting program:

RQ1: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program?

RQ2: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program?

Unlike a scientific study mainly dealing with facts, a generic qualitative inquiry is based on opinion and designed to generate discussion (E. Williams & Morrow, 2019). Through this study, I aimed to obtain participants' perspectives, and there were no right or wrong answers.

I considered but discarded quantitative and mixed methods methodologies favoring qualitative methods. I first considered quantitative methods, in which the focus is strictly statistical (Kahwati & Kane, 2020). This differs from qualitative methods, which involve querying people's subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences (Percy et al., 2020). I assessed experiences through the lens of the adult parents and guardians of juvenile offenders and evaluated strategies that addressed parents' and guardians' perceptions of the effectiveness of an adolescent firesetting reinvestment program. Quantitative methodology was thus eliminated because it was not well suited for this study.

I next considered qualitative methodology; unlike quantitative methods, which focus on numbers and breadth, qualitative methodology focuses on words and depth (Konecki, 2021). This study was exploratory. Through it, I aimed to bring to the surface opinions, thoughts, and feelings of parents and guardians of juvenile offenders who commit criminal acts of malicious firesetting. Using qualitative research methods, I captured the attitudes of the affected parents and guardians of the young fire offenders within the target population. Moreover, using a qualitative approach, I avoided becoming bound by the limitations of quantitative methods, employed a much more flexible approach, and obtained greater insight into a uniquely perceived phenomenon (Wincup, 2020). Previous research conducted by Agnew and Kaufman (2019) detailed how

reinvestment professionals who rely solely on statistical findings through quantitative methods to identify, understand, and categorize juveniles based on gender, race, age, and religion can be led astray by the misinterpretation of statistics results that overgeneralize the juvenile firesetting problem (Agnew & Kaufman, 2019).

Qualitative methodology is the best choice for understanding views and perceptions not communicated through statistics and numbers, so I utilized it in this study.

The third methodology considered was mixed methods; this involves quantitative and qualitative elements (Majumdar, 2021). Although using both procedures provides some benefits, doing so also includes the negative aspects of both methodologies (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). For example, quantitative methods remained irrelevant to this study, which related to the lived experiences of the participants (Kahwati & Kane, 2020). Because a mixed-methods approach would require quantitative and qualitative elements, I did not deem this methodology appropriate for this study.

There are five traditional approaches to research within the realm of qualitative methodology: ethnography, narrative analysis, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, and case study (Patton, 2021). Ethnographic research is derived from cultural anthropology and requires researchers to immerse themselves in a target population's environment—sometimes for years—to understand the goals, cultures, challenges, motivations, and themes that emerge from the experience (Percy et al., 2020). This approach requires the researcher to experience the environment firsthand and not rely on interviews or surveys (Pelto, 2018). I could not immerse myself in a juvenile program; hence, I did not use the ethnographic approach for this study.

Narrative research is an appropriate method for building a persona because the approach involves weaving together a sequence of events, usually from one or two individuals, to form a cohesive story (Patton, 2021). This approach requires in-depth interviews and authentic documents to reveal themes and individual stories illustrating more considerable life influences (Gilbert, 2021). Because strict academic guidelines bonded that I protect juveniles' rights, I could not contact individual juvenile offenders directly. Because direct contact is essential to narrative research, I did not use a narrative approach for this study.

In a phenomenological study, a researcher uses a combination of methods—such as interviews, reading documents, watching videos, and visiting places and events—to understand the meaning participants place on a phenomenon of interest (Percy et al., 2020). Phenomenological researchers ultimately rely on participants' perspectives to explain their motivations (Konecki, 2021). A subtle distinction between generic qualitative and phenomenological research guided my choice of the former over the latter (Wincup, 2020). The focus of this study was more on the actual external content of the research questions (i.e., the parents' and guardians' opinions, experiences, and reflections) and less on the internal organization and structure of the participants' experiences (Percy et al., 2020), so a phenomenological approach was unsuitable for answering the research questions and thus inappropriate for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Moreover, the need to analyze participants' subjective perspectives on actual, external happenings suggested generic qualitative inquiry and not phenomenological inquiry as the preferred qualitative method specific to this study (Percy et al., 2020).

A grounded theory researcher attempts to explain events (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To better establish theory, samples in grounded theory research are often more prominent than in other kinds of qualitative research and include 20–60 participants on average (Holton & Walsh, 2020). Researchers often use a grounded theory approach to help decision-makers understand how a community of users performs tasks (Holton & Walsh, 2020). Because this study did not involve inquiring about production or task performance but involved examining parents' and guardians' perceptions of a particular juvenile reinvestment program, I did not utilize a grounded theory approach.

The fifth traditional qualitative method, the case study, involves explaining a specific event (Holton & Walsh, 2020). This method involves deeply understanding a phenomenon through multiple data sources (Steppe, 2018). I recorded the perceptions of parents and guardians regarding a particular juvenile reinvestment program; I, therefore, considered a case study approach but eliminated it because of the potential risk for researcher bias specific to how individual beliefs can influence data collection based on the parameters of this particular study (Lichtman, 2019).

Having concluded that quantitative methods, mixed methods, and the five traditional qualitative methods were unsuited to the study, I chose to employ a generic qualitative approach and thematic analysis instead. This approach allowed me to examine participants' lived experiences and was, therefore, the most appropriate method for this study.

Generic qualitative research does not follow the traditional or established qualitative research approaches (Percy et al., 2020). Instead, generic qualitative studies draw on the strengths of established methods while maintaining the flexibility needed by

researchers whose work does not fall neatly within one of the traditional qualitative approaches (Wincup, 2020). Furthermore, an evaluation of a community-based juvenile firesetters program through the lens of parents and guardians is a socially constructed, theoretically interpretive investigation that focuses on how people interpret their experiences, how they make their worlds, and what meaning they give to their experiences. Moreover, the researcher aims to generate a detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation. Using a generic qualitative approach, the researcher commits to the highly inductive use of open codes and categorizing themes.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I acknowledged that the study participants and myself might have held values and biases that affected data collection or analysis. In terms of ontology, evaluating a juvenile firesetting program from the perspective of the child's custodian is multifaceted and complex. The multiple community-based stakeholders concerned with this adolescent firesetting prevention and treatment program may also have influenced the study's outcome in terms of policy, as the findings can be interpreted in multiple ways. I acknowledged that a high academic standard needed to be maintained, and in light of these facts, I acted as an objective agent. Researcher bias was minimized by following the protocol set concerning every phase of the study, and trustworthiness was enhanced by documenting all elements of the inquiry.

My philosophical ideas came from ontological assumptions acquired over a 30-year career as a firefighter, fire officer, fire investigator, and emergency manager. In addition, I must acknowledge my epistemological assumptions or my beliefs about human nature and malicious adolescent firesetting. My position as a firefighter, fire

officer, fire investigator, and emergency manager reflects my connection and passion for exploring reinvestment opportunities within the realm of intentional juvenile firesetting. I utilized reflectivity, the concept that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their positionality to understand their part or how they influence it. This reflectivity includes researchers being honest about their views and position and how these might directly or indirectly affect the design and interpretation of a research study. Reflectivity starts by identifying preconceptions brought into a project by the researcher, representing previous personal and professional experiences. In keeping with good academic practices, I acknowledged individual positionality formulated through a position within the professional community as a firefighter, fire officer, fire investigator, and emergency manager, having 30 years of experience investigating the origin and cause of fires.

My role as the researcher in this qualitative study was to position myself as a research instrument through which data were collected (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). A researcher's influence is more evident in qualitative than quantitative analysis (Wincup, 2020). While studying community-based juvenile firesetting programs and their effectiveness at reinvestment, I was an observer and interpreter of data. I observed how participants responded to questions by attending to their eye contact, facial expressions, and body language and listening to their statements. The phenomenon of juvenile firesetting is multifaceted and complex (Perks et al., 2019). Community stakeholders directly affected by adolescents' misuse of fire may interpret the study differently. My role in addressing this multifaceted and complex phenomenon remained that of an objective researcher (Binder et al., 2021). Bias was minimized by strictly abiding by the set protocols of the study and enhancing trustworthiness through documentation of all

elements throughout the study, which ultimately enabled me to remain objectively neutral (Williams & Marrow, 2019).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

I conducted a face-to-face interview to obtain valuable qualitative data. My thematic analysis identified patterns or themes within the qualitative data.

The study sample consisted of 12 parents/guardians of adolescent firesetting offenders. In keeping with best academic practices, 12 interviews are required to be sufficient to generate codes where the researcher is analyzing higher-level concepts for thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). In keeping with best academic practices for purposeful sampling, the 12 parents/guardians of youthful fire offenders came from a pool of adults accompanying their adolescent fire offenders either by voluntary committal or by court order through the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetter Prevention and Reinvestment Program. I asked an organizational representative to provide contact information for individuals believed to meet this study’s inclusion criteria. The extent to which the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal’s Office was involved was restricted to supplying contact information for participants who might meet this study’s inclusion criteria. Being positioned within the fire service community allowed me to make connections to speak with the chief fire marshal. The discussion to partner for this study was the choice of the chief fire marshal. I had no leverage, nor would I have used any influence if I had any. I did not work for the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County but was a retired New York City Fire Lieutenant and Fire Investigator. I acknowledged that I conducted the study as a Walden University doctoral

candidate and academic researcher. I selected parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters based on their age, relationship with their children, and participation in the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetting Intervention and Prevention Program.

I provided recruitment material in a letter describing the nature of the study and what was required of participants (Appendix A). Each participant was required to do a one-on-one interview. To ensure that I remained respectful of the participants' time, each parent or guardian participating in the study received an informed consent form at the start of the interview. The study's findings were presented in a verbal presentation that was audience-appropriate for the stakeholders. Information relevant to the inquiry was also provided to the North Carolina Office of the State Fire Marshal through the Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office.

### **Instrumentation**

I collected data using face-to-face interviews with the parents/guardians of young offenders who had completed the juvenile firesetting program. This research instrument allowed documentation of the life experiences of adolescents through the lens of participating parents/guardians. I used general strain theory and social learning theory combined with a generic qualitative approach to frame the semi-structured interview questions. I developed the instrument based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and utilizing my knowledge (Appendix B). Collecting data through interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the perceived effectiveness of the program studied. The data collected through interviews offered in-depth knowledge of the effectiveness of the City

of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetting Intervention and Prevention Program.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

With approval from the institutional review board, I contacted the organizational representative to obtain contact information for individuals believed to meet this study's inclusion criteria. It is imperative to note that the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office did not solicit the participation of parents or guardians of adolescents committed to the juvenile firesetters program but did provide contact information of those believed to meet this study's inclusion criteria. The recruitment and ultimate participation for this study rested solely with me, and I talked with potential adult participants and provided them with information about the study (Laureate Education, 2020). Those willing to participate were scheduled for an interview, and it was at the beginning of this meeting, the participants, if they chose, signed the consent form and were interviewed. Moreover, the participants were made aware that they were not required to participate and that their choice to participate or not participate in this study would not be made known to the fire marshal's office. Of significance, the participants' identity and involvement in this study were kept confidential through pseudonyms. I asked them the questions in Appendix B to elicit depictions of their lived experiences concerning the research questions. To reiterate, the decision by an individual not to participate in the study in no way affected the individual's attending child's participation in or completion of their treatment within the juvenile firesetting intervention program.

I recruited participants using purposeful sampling. This type of sampling involved intentionally selecting participants based on criteria, such as the likelihood of a participant being an information-rich case (Litchman, 2019). This allowed me to learn about the issues of central importance and significance to this inquiry (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). I identified this particular sample population from the existing academic literature, with each participant 18 years or older and the adult parent/guardian of a youthful offender aged 11–17. The literature suggests that adolescent curiosity about fire is a continuous theme when examining the phenomenon of juvenile firesetting starting at age eleven and ending at seventeen (Peters & Freeman, 2020). It remains a reoccurring correlation in multiple academic studies in which psychiatric patients and firesetters ages 11 to 17 are distinguished from non-firesetters by the intensity of their curiosity about fire. (Peters & Freeman, 2020). Substance abuse, specific to cannabis, is another common theme identified in academic research as a common risk factor for youth ages 11 to 17 (Luna & Wright, 2021). Academic studies have also evaluated the influence of abuse as a predictor of youthful firesetting behavior between ages 11 to 17, with 48% of this population perceiving a significant correlation between their malicious fireplay compared with adolescents who have not experienced abuse (Martin et al., 2019).

The selection of participants was solely at the discretion of the academic researcher, and the chief fire marshal did not participate in any way in determining which individuals met the study's inclusion criteria. I declare that the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office will only provide possible contact information for individuals believed to meet the study's exclusion criteria. In keeping with academic research standards concerning amenities and ethics, the interviews took

place in a public library a short walk from the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal’s Office. The library offered reservable space in the form of a private location not affiliated with the City of Charlotte Fire Academy and a private classroom-style room that was soundproof for musical instrument practice. As described above, I invited those parents and guardians to participate in the interview process at this location, enabling confidentiality and ensuring that others do not overhear the participants. No participant received any promise of favoritism or monetary reward. Participants were able to stop participating at any time without any repercussions.

After participant selection was completed, I set up a time for a face-to-face interview at the predetermined unaffiliated location away from the fire academy. During this face-to-face meeting, I reviewed the consent form, including participant rights, and addressed any participant questions. I remained mindful of the participants' time and began the interview once the subject had ample time to review and sign the consent form (Laureate Education, 2020).

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 min and was held in a closed conference room at a public library that is unaffiliated with the fire academy and similar in appearance to a regular classroom but had visible soundproofing in place. I recorded the audio of the interviews and transcribed the recordings (Smith & Natalier, 2021). Pseudonyms were used to identify participants. The signed voluntary consent form was the only document collected from the participants' and this document and all subsequent recordings and transcribed data produced as a result of the interviews was password protected on an external hard drive locked in a file cabinet at the researcher’s home office. From an ethics perspective,

I acknowledged that no member was checking performed by emailing or contacting the participants. I conducted an audience-appropriate verbal presentation, which offered the best way to share the study's results with the fire marshal's office.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I analyzed the data using a six-step thematic analysis technique (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). Using a six-step thematic analysis technique, I identified, analyzed, and reported different themes within the acquired data set (Lichtman, 2019). As Maguire and Delahunt (2019) explained, the thematic analysis technique can assist the researcher in organizing and detailing the data and developing themes by interpreting different angles within the research topic. I then synchronized the themes to synthesize the collected data relevant to the research questions (Lichtman, 2019). In keeping with research guidelines, all appropriate documentation, including transcripts and audio recordings, was password protected and safeguarded in a locked file cabinet inside my home office for no less than five years and then subsequently destroyed (Lichtman, 2019).

I used a six-step method of familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up to conduct a thematic analysis of the acquired data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). A thematic analysis allowed me to analyze the data by organizing and describing themes in detail and by documenting these developing themes by interpreting the adult participants' experience through their accompanying youthful offenders' participation within the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program (Lichtman, 2019).

Thematic analysis is a specific qualitative method and, although not constituting a complete research design, can be used within generic qualitative research (Maguire &

Delahunt, 2019). Researchers often use thematic analysis to analyze data collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews that investigate subjective experiences of objective phenomena—such as a parent or guardian’s experience of a juvenile firesetting program. There are three academically recognized types of thematic analysis: inductive analysis, theoretical analysis, and thematic analysis with constant comparison (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). I utilized inductive analysis for this study.

Inductive analysis is data-driven and does not involve relevant data into any preexisting categories; a researcher using the method sets aside any preunderstandings (Percy et al., 2020). Data collected from interviews, observations, and open-ended questions were analyzed separately and served as my data sources. I used Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-step analysis method. I retained the transcripts for academic review while ensuring participants' confidentiality by using pseudonyms throughout the study (Laureate Education, 2020).

I reviewed and familiarized myself with the data collected from each participant. Then I examined highlighted data and used the research questions to decide whether highlighted data were relevant to the study (Percy et al., 2020). I stored data eliminated as irrelevant in a separate file, which was essential because relevance may require later reevaluation. To code data, I implemented a method of keeping track of individual data. I developed patterns by clustering related or corresponding data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). I identified data corresponding to a particular pattern and made connections as themes emerged. By taking all identified patterns and looking for emerging or overarching themes, I placed patterns into previously assembled clusters manifesting from those patterns. As meaningful elements across patterns continue to develop into

themes, a level of abstraction supported by practices appeared (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After all the data was analyzed and arranged into themes in a supporting matrix with corresponding supportive patterns, I identified the overall theme in the final report.

Initial coding was the first step of the analysis. Once I completed coding, I scheduled a face-to-face meeting with the organizational representative through the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal’s Office. I discussed coding and emerging themes with the administrative representative in the spirit of scientific research cooperation to establish a common baseline of knowledge in the study and to promote a continued academic and professional learning relationship (Konecki, 2021).

The initial coding step of the inductive analysis was designed to deconstruct qualitative data into discrete parts for examination and comparison, exposing similarities and differences among the elements (Cariola, 2019). This method allowed me to remain open and impartial regarding data content (Yaghi, 2019).

Axial coding begins with a review of the initial coding, and the purpose of axial coding is to reassemble data split during the initial coding to identify dominant codes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). Axial coding is a qualitative research technique that involves relating data in this study from interviews to reveal codes, categories, and subcategories within the participant’s voices, facial expressions, and mannerisms that produced linkages (Lichtman, 2019). The final report presented the emerging codes and themes (Umamaheswar, 2021).

The described data collection and analysis plan ensured the reliability and validity of the findings and addressed any ethical issues by the highest level of academic standards in qualitative research (Majumdar, 2021). Educational standards were

maintained by ensuring that the measurement was consistent from individual to individual participant interviewed, across settings, and at different times (Patton, 2021). The academic researcher acknowledges that consistency of information was essential for producing the study's findings (Pelto, 2018).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

During the study, I acted as the instrument of analysis, making judgments about coding, themes, decontextualization, and recontextualization of the data (Percy, 2020). A qualitative researcher demonstrates the conduct of data analysis by recording, systemizing, and disclosing the analysis methods with enough detail to allow a reader to confirm the validity and trustworthiness of the study (E. Williams & Morrow, 2019). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used across various epistemologies and is an academically sound way to answer the proposed study's research questions (Patton, 2021). In analyzing peoples' participation, thematic analysis is helpful because it enables the researcher to examine the meaning parents/guardians attach to their civic participation within their child or dependents' journey through juvenile firesetting reinvestment (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019).

I ensured the validity and trustworthiness of the study through his attention to ethics, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Neil, 2019). By recording, systematizing, and disclosing thematic analysis methods in detail, the reader determines if the process is ethical, credible, and possesses transferability and confirmability (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

### **Ethical Procedures**

To ameliorate ethical risk and ensure the safety and well-being of the study participants, the researcher adhered to the research process described in this chapter. The potential ethical risks of the study include participants' coercion and privacy breach (Percy et al., 2020). Invited parents/guardians could choose whether they participated in the proposed research. Before beginning any data collection, all participants were aware of their rights. I reiterated to all participants that they could stop participating without consequences. No participants withdrew, but if any participant withdrew, their data would have been destroyed (Laureate Education, 2020).

The use of rigorous methods and truthful interpretation and representation of data ensures the credibility of this research study (E. Williams & Morrow, 2019). I applied various ways during the proposed research to ensure rigor. I established a protocol for the study that provided credibility through continued guidance from the university's institutional review board and declared from an ethics perspective that there would be no member checking. It was essential to establish credibility that participants' intake was slow enough to receive enough time to understand the study and ask questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I ensured rigor in this credible study by remaining available for questions and keeping a digital journal to reflect on the process and events (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). To prolong engagement, I provided a personal background and time frame when describing the study's setting (Majumdar, 2021). A digital research journal that included personal observations and reactions allowed me to bracket my own experiences and biases (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). The digital journal used in this study also included notes of discussions throughout the research process, which provides an audit trail.

Confidentiality was established by oral communication, and a consent form was explained to each participant during the initial intake process at a designated time immediately before conducting the interview (Pelto, 2018). To address the risk of potential breaches of participants' privacy, I anonymized all personal identifying information in the data (Majumdar, 2021). All personal identifying information associated with participants—consent forms, files, transcripts, and audio recordings—was stored on a password-protected external hard drive that was locked in a file cabinet in my home office to assure confidentiality (Percy et al., 2020). Data and records were kept in my home office on a secure, password-protected external hard drive stored in a locked file cabinet. I am the only one with the key to the file cabinet and the only one with the password to the external hard drive. The data and records were kept for five years in keeping with academic standards. After that time, the data will be deleted entirely from the external hard drive, and any paper documentation will be shredded. Only I have access to the confidential data. All identifying information was removed from transcripts. All documentation associated with this study was secured for five years and then destroyed (Patton, 2021).

Assigning pseudonyms to participants will overcome any issues with confidentiality (Percy et al., 2020). Furthermore, using a consent form allowed only adult parents/guardians to participate and avoided contact or controversy with juveniles by protecting this vulnerable population's rights (Patton, 2021). I understood that some participants could be considered to belong to a vulnerable population. Suppose during the interview process; the discussion veered toward other illegal activities that the adult participant or dependent may have engaged in. In that case, I declared that I have no legal

obligation to report such information and that no such disclosure would violate any court agreements related to the participants or their dependents attending the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program. Moreover, I declared that my current profession does not require reporting suspected abuse.

Establishing the transferability of a study's findings involved demonstrating that the results were applicable in other settings (Patton, 2021). I intended to allow readers to make assessments of the usefulness and transferability of the study's findings. The dependability of findings involves the consistency and reliability of the results under similar conditions across time and space (Collins et al., 2021). I was responsible for providing a detailed description of the study so that those seeking to transfer the findings to their situations could evaluate the transferability of this study.

I retained all datasets used in the analysis process. The digital data analysis log included documentation of each recruitment and data collection interview and observations to help reduce bias and confirm themes (Cariola, 2019). I ensured confirmability by supporting conclusions and interpretations with direct quotes from the available data (Cariola, 2019).

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 provides a review of the research design and explains the choice of research design. In addition, the chapter considered alternative methodologies and research approaches for this study. A generic qualitative method using thematic analysis was selected to examine an intervention and prevention program available to adolescents with abnormal firesetting tendencies in the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.

The chapter also defined the population, sample, and instrumentation to evaluate the community-based juvenile firesetting program. The inquiry was conducted through the lens of parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters remanded voluntarily or by court order to a reinvestment program. The chapter expanded on the proposed data collection processes (via semi-structured interviewing), thematic analysis, and the steps to protect participant confidentiality. Appendices A and B provide the recruiting materials and interview questions. Chapter 4 gives the study's results, and Chapter 5 discusses my recommendations for the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program based on this study's results.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

This qualitative study examined the effectiveness of community-based juvenile firesetting programs through a custodial lens in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. I presented the phenomenon of interest using generic qualitative research methods in a thematic analysis of interviews with the community's most influential stakeholders: parents and guardians of adolescents who misused fire. The data collected was structured around the adult custodians of juvenile offenders who received treatment by either court order or voluntary commitment to the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetters Intervention and Prevention Program.

RQ1: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program?

RQ2: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program?

Chapter 4 includes a description of the data collection setting, an explanation as to why the demographics of the study's participants were not part of this study, and descriptions of the implementation of the data collection and data analysis procedures described in Chapter 3. Next, Chapter 4 includes a discussion of the evidence of the trustworthiness of this study's results and then a presentation of the results of the data analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results.

### **Settings**

Interviews with 12 custodians of adolescent firesetting offenders were completed. These offenders had been committed voluntarily or by court order to the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetters Reinvestment Program. Interviews with these 12 legal adult guardians were conducted in person in a soundproof conference room regularly utilized to facilitate musical practice at a public library within a short distance from the City of Charlotte–Mecklenburg County Fire Academy near public transportation. Participants chose all interview times, and the periods were spaced out to ensure that participating subjects would not encounter each other when either entering or exiting the facility—allowing the participants to choose when they were interviewed increased the likelihood that the participating guardians would be comfortable during their interviews and would therefore provide complete and comprehensive responses to the interview questions. Conducting the discussions in a private, soundproofed conference room not affiliated with any fire, police, or social services was intended to provide participants comfort by ensuring their utmost privacy and safety. The participants needed to know that their views were respected, that participation was strictly voluntary to ensure informed consent, and that the expectations about the outcome and impact of the research for the parent or guardian participants were discussed thoroughly with me. Moreover, the participants were made aware that they were not required to participate and that their choice to participate or not participate in this study was not made known to anyone.

### **Demographics**

Researchers have attempted to categorize juvenile firesetters based on demographics and psychological and psychiatric data collection. However, academic scholars have little consensus regarding specific risk factors or characteristics common to all juvenile firesetters because the factors vary wildly (Peters & Freeman, 2020). The literature review suggested that the causes of firesetting in juveniles are likely a complex interplay between environmental, psychological, and biological factors (Luna & Wright, 2021). The complex nature of juvenile firesetting necessitates an extensive interview and a multi-disciplinary array of services (Martin et al., 2019). For these reasons, this study did not examine demographics but strictly focused on the perspective of 12 juvenile offenders' parents/guardians to determine if these 12 stakeholders believed that this specific program was working, was ineffective, or needed improvement.

### **Data Collection**

One in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interview was conducted with 12 custodians of justice-involved juveniles. I identified this sample population from a contact list provided by an organizational representative from the fire marshal's office. The extent to which the fire marshal's office was involved was restricted to supplying contact information for participants who might meet this study's inclusion criteria. I retained sole authority in choosing the 12 custodians, the parents or guardians of youthful offenders aged 11–17. The literature suggested that adolescent curiosity about fire is a continuous theme when examining the phenomenon of juvenile firesetting starting in the preteen years and ending sometime before adulthood (Luna & Wright, 2021). It remains a reoccurring correlation in multiple academic studies in which psychiatric patients and

adolescent preteens or teenagers are distinguished from adolescent non-firesetters by the intensity of their curiosity about fire (Peters & Freeman, 2020). Substance abuse, specifically abuse of alcohol and cannabis, is another common theme identified in academic research as a common risk factor for youth ages 11 to 17 (Luna & Wright, 2021). Academic studies have also evaluated the influence of abuse as a predictor of youthful firesetting behavior between the ages of 11 and 17, with 48% of this population perceiving a significant correlation to their malicious fireplay compared with adolescents who have not experienced abuse (Martin et al., 2019).

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, yielding approximately 72 pages of single-spaced transcriptions. Transcripts were uploaded into NVivo software for analysis. I analyzed the data using the six-step procedure for thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). The first phase of the thematic analysis consisted of becoming familiar with the collected data. In this phase, I conducted an in-depth review of the data collected so that I could become familiar with its contents.

The second phase generated initial codes based on vital descriptive words and phrases specific to the most basic data that could be evaluated cohesively. I transitioned into a complete evaluation of the collected data, identifying repeated patterns in the data used for coding purposes. The third phase of thematic analysis consisted of searching for and identifying reoccurring themes. In this phase, I used the codes developed in the previous step to create potential themes in the collected data. This process included analyzing the codes and the similarities between different codes used to form themes. The fourth phase in the thematic analysis process consisted of reviewing the identified

themes. I refined the themes developed in the previous phase in this fourth transitional phase. The fifth phase in the thematic analysis process of this study consisted of defining and naming themes. I further transitioned into a more refined definition of the present themes in this phase. Regarding this study, the sixth and final phase of the thematic analysis process consisted of producing the results presented in this chapter.

Table 1 depicts the themes that emerged during the analysis process, the codes that contributed to the themes, and the number of data elements assigned to each code based on the frequency of each code.

**Table 1***Themes, Codes Contributing to Themes, and Code Frequency*

Themes	Codes contributing to theme	Code frequency
RQ1/Parent/Guardian Theme 1: The current intervention and prevention program was perceived as inadequate when applied without input from the adolescent's parent or guardian	Program—inadequate treatment	3
	Program—was not strict enough	3
	Program—is too difficult	2
	Program—services were too general and not specific enough	4
RQ1/Parent/Guardian Theme 2: The current intervention and prevention program was perceived as adequate when applied with input from the adolescent's parent or guardian	Program—adequate treatment	4
	Program—services were specific to the individual participant	2
RQ1/Parent/Guardian Theme 3: The current intervention and prevention program was perceived inadequate when staff with the necessary expertise in addressing alcohol and cannabis abuse were unavailable	Adequate services for alcohol and cannabis abuse/dependency	2
	Inadequate services for drug and alcohol abuse	4
RQ1/Parent/Guardian Theme 4: Program staff was perceived as effective at identifying adolescents who abuse alcohol and cannabis and need services	Services were adequate	1
	Services were inadequate	2
RQ1/Parent/Guardian Theme 5: The program staff were effective at working with behavioral health services to provide interventions and prevention	Services were adequate	3
	Services were inadequate	6
RQ1/Parent/Guardian Theme 6: The program staff did not have enough training to provide adequate interventions and prevention services	Too much referring out	2
	The program did not offer enough mental health care referrals	1

Themes	Codes contributing to theme	Code frequency
RQ2/Parent/Guardian Theme 1: Parents and guardians suggested that the program's services address all aspects of the adolescent's life	The program—needed to be stricter with juvenile	4
	The program—needed to be stricter with parent	6
	The program reached the youth's school, family, and peers	2
RQ2/Parent/Guardian Theme 2: Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommended adapting tools to assess better if a youth is abusing alcohol or cannabis	The program was good at assessing alcohol and cannabis abuse	2
	The program was not good at assessing alcohol and cannabis abuse	4
RQ2/Parent/Guardian Theme 3: Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommended that youth with mental health issues be addressed separately from other adolescent offenders	Good alternative to incarceration	3
	Dedicated juvenile mental health program	1
	Intervention outside the program for cannabis and alcohol abuse	2
RQ2/Parent/Guardian Theme 4: Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommended increasing the number of staff with alcohol and cannabis dependency	Sufficient training for staff to address alcohol and cannabis use	2
	Access to drug and alcohol counselors	4
RQ2/Parent/Guardian Theme 5: Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommended incorporating the skills of critical thinking and independence into the program's curriculum	Sufficient skills for critical thinking	1
	Insufficient skills for critical thinking and independence	2

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

This study's credibility was measured by the degree to which the findings accurately represent real-world emotions and perspectives. In this study, I acted as the instrument of analysis, making decisions about coding, themes, decontextualization, and recontextualization of the acquired data. To enhance this study's credibility, I demonstrated the context of data analysis by recording, systemizing, and disclosing the analysis methods with enough detail to allow a reader to confirm the validity and trustworthiness of the study. I also enhanced the *dependability* of the results or the extent to which the same results would be reached if other researchers replicated the study using thematic analysis. This qualitative research method is an academic standard of analysis used across various epistemologies and was an academically sound way to answer the study's research questions (Patton, 2021). In utilizing thematic analysis, I ensured not only the credibility and the dependability of this study but also the transferability of the study's findings, allowing for examination in another research context (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). Thematic analysis furthered this study's *conformability* or the extent to which this study's results analyzed peoples' participation and ultimately facilitated my ability to examine the meaning that the parents or guardians attached to their civic participation within their child's or dependent's journey through juvenile firesetting reinvestment (Maguire & Delahunt, 2019). Moreover, I presented evidence of the trustworthiness of this study through my attention to the academic standards of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Neil, 2019).

## **Results**

The research questions drove this presentation of results. Results associated with the first research question indicated the participants' perceptions of how their involvement in a juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program could influence successful outcomes for their adolescent firesetting offender. Concerning the second research question, results indicated participants' views of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program based on their adult experiences and observations when accompanying their dependent adolescent offender through the program.

### **Research Question 1**

RQ1 was as follows: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement in successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program? The most influential stakeholder group in a child's environment organized this presentation of results related to the first research question (i.e., the parents or guardians). Within the presentation of results from the stakeholder group, results are organized by theme.

#### ***Parents/Guardians***

Six themes emerged during data analysis from the interviews with parents or guardians related to the first research question. The first theme was that the current intervention and prevention program was perceived as inadequate when applied without input from the adolescent's parent or guardian. The second theme was as follows: The current intervention and prevention program was perceived as adequate when used with information from the adolescent's parent or guardian. The third theme was as follows:

The current intervention and prevention program was perceived inadequate when staff with the necessary expertise in addressing alcohol and cannabis abuse were unavailable.

The fourth theme was the following: Program staff was perceived as effective at identifying adolescents who abuse alcohol or cannabis and need services. The fifth theme was: The program staff effectively worked with behavioral health services to provide interventions and prevention. The sixth theme was that the program staff did not have enough training to make interventions and prevention services adequate.

**Theme 1: The Current Intervention and Prevention Program Was Perceived Inadequate When Applied Without Input From the Adolescent's Parent or**

**Guardian.** All 12 parents/guardians (100%) participated and contributed data to this theme, and the presentation of the results specific to this theme included representative quotations.

Adam [a pseudonym given to Parent 1] was the biological father of a 16-year-old female juvenile firesetter. Adam had custody over three of his biological children, one of whom completed an adolescent firesetting intervention and prevention program. Adam continued to smile, which was difficult to perceive, but I, a father of three, believed it was from nervousness. During the interview, it became known that Adam was happy that his dependent was finally receiving help for her firesetting. Adam's child had an exciting story that revealed an affliction with cannabis, and his perspective offers insight into this study's findings. Adam's child was court-ordered into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program for malicious fire play. From the parent's perspective, the adolescent's time in the program appears to have impacted the child positively, with the child again appreciating life, returning to church, and setting goals after completing the

program. Adam's dependent came from a family of divorced parents that included three siblings, one younger and two older brothers. Adam had a child with a woman; this child began to set fires and became addicted to marijuana. The mother of that child is currently incarcerated in a state correctional facility for selling marijuana and fentanyl and arson. Adam's dependent had juvenile justice involvement for malicious false fire alarms and bomb threats at her school, intentional firesetting at her school and other structures, excessive cannabis use, and family problems. The participant's perception was that his adolescent viewed the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program as a learning experience and a chance to grow. Even with all the hardships that Adam's juvenile has endured, the child, according to the parent, maintained a strong sense of self-responsibility and determination.

Parent/Guardian 1 regretted his child's juvenile justice involvement because of multiple attempts to convince the program staff that the child's excessive cannabis use directly contributed to the malicious fireplay:

She has been involved in the juvenile justice system on three different occasions. After the third youth referral, she was remanded to the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program. Moreover, no, I am not ready to give up on her. The first two times did not help, and no one would listen to me about her smoking marijuana. I did not think that the juvenile firesetting program would work. Whenever she would set a fire when she was high, I got mad as hell because nobody listened to the family and parents, especially the cops and fire department. They do not care about what a parent is saying or what is going on in their life. My daughter was continuously high and often reeked of marijuana

cigarettes, yet the cops or firefighters did not know anything about it. The first two times she was picked up by the cops and talked to by the fire marshal [fire marshal's name omitted], I did not get a chance to speak to them and let them know she was always stoned (Parent 1, Adam)

Thomas [a pseudonym given to parent number 2] was the biological father of a 15-year-old male adolescent firesetter. After multiple petitions to the court, he finally convinced the juvenile justice system to commit his child to the youth firesetting reinvestment program voluntarily. After answering an interview question, Thomas continually looked down and nodded to affirm the researchers' acknowledgment.

Parent/Guardian 2 objected to the repeated personnel changes at the fire marshal's office and blamed his child's inadequate treatment on a lack of coordination among the program staff:

I am the father of an adolescent participating in the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program. My wife was wanted on a custodial interference family court warrant and had another child whose whereabouts, along with my wife, are unknown. My biological son completed the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program, and I have one brother. Still, I do not know my birth father because I was removed by the courts after being abused and was then raised by my grandparents. My son was in the program and had juvenile justice involvement, such as continued cannabis use, graffiti, theft, bullying, and running away. He was very active in the Black Lives Matter movement. Supporting my child [name of the child omitted] within the youth firesetting reinvestment program has helped with [name of child omitted] his cannabis abuse, graffiti, theft, running away, and

exposure to family violence and allowed him to complete school and hopefully get him a job one day. The juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program improved my relationship with my child and taught me to manage my anger and learn new acceptable ways to discipline. My son was in trouble and in and out of family court for two years, which was ridiculous. He would just come in and out of family court without learning anything. There was no help here at all, and I continued to ask the judge and the court to address him being stoned all the time and setting fires, but I received no help, and for me, there has never been any help. My child has been picked up by the cops for setting fires in his school and the park by our apartment. I tried to convince the cops to get him counseling for all his weed, smoking, and fire stuff, but we have been shuffled around through the system, and no one addressed his drug use and burning things. (Parent 2, Thomas)

Becky [a pseudonym given to parent number 3] was the biological mother of a 17-year-old female adolescent firesetter. Becky was in and out of foster care and was adopted by her grandmother at an early age. At 18, Becky moved out of her grandmother's house and had a child who was now completing the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program. Becky kept a blank facial expression throughout the interview, except when she occasionally smiled or sighed. Her story and her perception of the many challenges and obstacles that stand in her and her daughter's way made me aware of the barriers some of these families encounter and the need for intervention and prevention treatment.

Parent/Guardian 3 perceived that the treatment offered to her daughter was too brief in duration to have a lasting effect or positively change her life:

My daughter has suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ADHD and has been under a doctor's care for this mental health disorder. Her history included running away, domestic violence, drug use, and eating marijuana edibles all day because she thought smoking was disgusting. She has never had anything other than negative family influence and abuse by her worthless father. She does not have her father, which has driven her to smoke weed and act out by setting fires. Her experience in the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program has been positive. The program taught her to respect me more and helped straighten our relationship. When she spoke of her father, it was of forgiveness, and there was less anger in her eyes. She has made friends in the program, which she had never had. The program at the fire academy has also made her feel more mature and confident. Every time my daughter [adolescent name omitted] was high or had a meltdown, the cops would come and send her [adolescent name omitted] for a psych evaluation. I tried to inform the hospital people about her addiction to marijuana edibles and putting setting her stuff on fire. Still, she would just come home after being released, and it would happen all over again. She would get high after being upset and have a breakdown, and then set a fire in the house.

Lauri [a pseudonym given to parent number 4] was the biological mother of a 16-year-old female adolescent firesetter. Lauri appeared to be very motivated and had a remarkable ability to self-reflect. Lori came from an abusive family, divorced parents,

abusive relationships, and teen pregnancy; she had been raped. Lauri's child has a background that includes running away a lot and using cannabis, and burglary of habitation while under the influence of marijuana. Parent/Guardian 4 feels that the current interventions and prevention services were entirely inadequate to address her child acting out and to help with the child's [adolescent name omitted] excessive marijuana use:

My child has experienced a great deal of grief in her life, but she has gained confidence during her time at the juvenile firesetters program and has even built some self-esteem. I feel that part of her suffering was due to my issues of coming from a broken and abusive home to having miscarriages and being raped. Despite her offenses and complex challenges, my daughter has grown in the program, found Jesus and great mentors, and is experiencing personal growth. This program has helped my daughter and me by giving us more vital reflection skills needed to be successful and has enabled us to identify our struggles as a family. The problem with the program was that they sent you to two different counselors and therapists, but it was almost like a revolving door until the underlining issues were revealed. There is so much going on with my kid like she already has learning problems and other psychological stuff that kids go through, especially teenagers. However, now she is getting into all this weed smoking, and now she is stealing from me and getting into trouble with the law, like running away and even setting a car on fire when she was high. My perspective as a parent and being around other parents in this program was that they all have some cannabis addiction and trauma background and do not know how to cope with all of this

except through drugs and alcohol, and fire play. If you attend one of these program sessions at the fire academy, you will see how sad and downhearted these kids were; most have no idea why they set a fire, but as a parent, I feel that they are looking for help and their firesetting is a way to achieve attention.

Joe [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 5] was the biological father of a 17-year-old female adolescent firesetter. Joe took full responsibility for his and his daughter's life and perceived that local leaders of Black Lives Matter radicalized his daughter and are why she set a police car on fire. Joe appeared very mature, was kind, and treated me respectfully during the interview. He also seemed to regret permitting his daughter to attend a Black Lives Matter protest. Joe's daughter has been court-ordered to complete the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program, and that is something that he seems hesitant to talk about. Joe did not place blame on anyone other than himself and his daughter.

Parent/Guardian 5 felt that the current interventions and prevention services were inadequate to prevent his child [adolescent name omitted] from being indoctrinated into a radical group:

My daughter followed what she had learned from the Black Lives Matter people. She was arrested for doing what Black Lives Matter wanted her to do: set a cop car on fire. The truth is that this kid followed an irresponsible organization's orders, and she paid for it. Being in this program helped her to think for herself and plan for the future. She realizes that she is the only one who can prevent herself from achieving her goals. This was not her first rodeo at a Black Lives Matter protest in which she was arrested and released. The judge did not want to

follow through with sentencing her for arson because she did not want to affect her future chances in life with a felony conviction. You know they wanted to give her one more chance, and I appreciate that. I appreciate the second chance, but they gave her multiple opportunities. One pass after another pass until she went in front of another judge that ordered her to complete the adolescent firesetting intervention program.

Bill [a pseudonym given to parent number 6] was not the biological father of a 15-year-old male adolescent firesetter. Bill legally adopted the adolescent from a state-run foster care facility. Bill responded to the questions with brief statements, mostly yes or no, with an occasional nod and continually looking away.

Parent/Guardian 6 perceived that the treatment offered to his adopted son was too brief in duration to have a lasting effect or positively change his life:

My boy appears to look up to other neighborhood kids that do not attend school, and he was placed into this program for truancy, burglary, and setting some abandoned cars on fire. My kid does not have much to share when asked about his experiences with the program, and the kid does not give any insight into barriers that may prevent him from achieving his goals. The kid does discuss that he only wants to be in the NBA and that his favorite part of the program for him was the team building, in which he and the other kids would get to play basketball with some of the staff. I am neutral about my kid's experience in the program, and it will help him not to set future fires, but the program should be extended and have more of a follow-up.

Mike [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 7] was the biological father of a 16-year-old male adolescent firesetter. Mike was polite and kept good eye contact throughout the interview. Mike had family struggles growing up and committed offenses to fit in with friends. Mike's child was in the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program because of crimes that included criminal mischief, excessive cannabis usage, and setting a park bench and a tree on fire.

Parent/Guardian 7 felt that the current interventions and prevention services were inadequate to prevent his child [adolescent name omitted] from being influenced by peers:

When I asked my son who impacts his decision-making, he immediately mentioned his friends and never mentioned his family or me as having a role in influencing his behavior. We struggled to raise him and have a relationship with him, but after completing the program, we hope he will help around the house more and listen to his parents.

Brian [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 8] was the biological father of a 12-year-old male adolescent firesetter. Brian was very respectful and openly shared his experiences with me during the interview.

Parent/Guardian 8 objected to the repeated personnel changes at the fire marshal's office and blamed his child's inadequate treatment on a lack of coordination among the program staff:

When the cops picked him up for setting a fire, he did not live at home with me but with his mother. Because I was not in his life then, he would hang out with some bad kids by his mother's house, and they would like to smoke weed and

then set a fire mainly in the woods. This program helped him to have a relationship with me again and eventually got him help for his cannabis use. I hope our relationship will repair itself and get stronger, and he will be able to complete school.

Rob [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 9] was the biological father of an 11-year-old male adolescent firesetter. Rob continually smiled and enjoyed sharing his experience with me. Rob's child had gone into the firesetting intervention program at his request. Rob's child had broken into his office and set a fire.

Parent/guardian 9 felt that the current interventions and prevention services were inadequate to prevent his child [adolescent name omitted] from being influenced by peers or social media:

I asked the family court judge to send my kid [adolescent name omitted] to the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program, but they released him under my recognizance. It took multiple attempts to get him into this program. He [adolescent name omitted] was a good kid, but some of his behavior comes from trying to fit in with his friends. He and his friends were watching a TikTok video, and in the video, a kid broke into their dad's office and set a fire because the dad had taken the Xbox away. I took his gaming system away because he was not listening to me, and I found out that he cut school with some of his friends. He [adolescent name omitted] was caught at the scene by a security guard who discovered that my son had broken into the construction office and set a fire.

When asked why he [adolescent name omitted] did it, my son broke down and said that he and his friends were watching a video and that this would be the best

way to get back at me for taking his Xbox away. He [adolescent name omitted] even dared to record it on his cell phone and post it on Snapchat. I hope this program will set him on a straighter path, but they sure do not make it easy to get your kid into this program.

Jerry [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 10] was the biological father of a 14-year-old male adolescent firesetter. Jerry continually looked down during the interview and answered questions with nods and brief statements. Jerry's child was in the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program for setting a fire in his school. Jerry and his child appear to have very little family support, and Jerry stated that he is estranged from his wife, brother, and sister.

Parent 10 objected to being able to find help from the juvenile justice system and blamed his child's inadequate treatment on a lack of coordination among the social services:

I tried my best with my kid, but I had no support, not from his mom or brother or sister. The lack of family support is a big reason my kid is in this program. I am a single dad working two jobs and raising a kid on my own there were no services to help someone like me. I even tried a peer support group at my church, but when I went there, I was the only guy; it was all women. I am just saying that in my experience, there are many programs to help women in a situation like this, but I have been unable to find support in a male peer group type of setting.

Pat [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 11] was the biological mother of a 17-year-old female adolescent firesetter. Pat took no responsibility for her daughter's actions and perceived her daughter should not be in trouble for setting a police van on fire

during a Black Lives Matter protest. Pat appeared very agitated and was not respectful during the interview. She did not regret permitting her daughter to attend a Black Lives Matter protest but did regret that her daughter got caught. Pat's daughter has been court-ordered to complete the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program. She seems proud that her daughter was arrested for being on the right side of social justice and blaming law enforcement, which she did not hesitate to repeat during the interview. Pat has accused others of conspiring against her daughter, including politicians, police, the fire marshal's office, the government, and everyone and everything except her daughter.

Parent/Guardian 11 felt biased about her experience at the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program. Pat did not mention any helpful experiences:

My daughter was exercising her peaceful right to protest; it was just an abuse of police powers. She did nothing wrong. It is about time that we start standing up against this draconian government that continues to suppress the rights of people of color. My daughter should not have to complete this program, but this corrupt system will imprison her if she does not.

Susan [a pseudonym given to parent/guardian number 12] was the biological mother of a 13-year-old male adolescent firesetter. Susan maintained eye contact during the interview and answered questions with brief statements. Susan's child was in the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program for setting fire to a neighbor's garage. Susan and her child appeared to have some family support, and Susan stated that she believes her child's malicious fire play started after her husband, the boy's dad, suffered a fatal heart attack during the child's school basketball game. The ambulance was significantly

delayed, and our son watched as bystanders attempted CPR, but by the time the ambulance arrived, he was dead:

Parent/Guardian 12 objected to being unable to find help and blamed his child's inadequate treatment on a lack of coordination among the social services:

My son was arrested for setting our neighbor's garage on fire. I noticed sometime after his dad died that he [adolescent name omitted] became removed and even withdrawn from the things he [adolescent name omitted] enjoyed doing with his dad, like playing baseball for his school and watching his favorite [Major League Baseball team name omitted] baseball team on television. Our family was a close and happy one. My husband was the breadwinner, and I enjoyed staying home and raising our child. Now with his passing, I am back to work full-time, cleaning houses all day and even working at a [Supermarket name omitted] supermarket, sometimes at night, to make ends meet. I have not been able to keep a close eye on my son [adolescent name omitted] as I was able to do in the past before I started working. As a widowed mom raising a child, it has been a big adjustment for us. I know this all started after his father's death, and I feel he [adolescent name omitted] is acting out for attention that I cannot give him by working two jobs as the sole provider.

**Theme 2: The Current Intervention and Prevention Program Was Perceived as Adequate When Applied With Input From the Adolescent's Parent or Guardian.**

Six parents/guardians (7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12; 50%) contributed to this theme.

Parent/Guardian 7 stated that his child was court-ordered to complete the juvenile

firesetters reinvestment program. Although this angered him at the time, parent seven was grateful for the information the program gave him:

He [adolescent name omitted] was ordered to the program after his first arrest for setting a fire. They will not let him return to school until he [adolescent name omitted] has finished the program. I was furious at first with all the interruptions in our regular schedule, but after accompanying him through the program, I realized I was getting good information. He [adolescent name omitted] also was referred for treatment at a hospital as part of the program for excessive synthetic cannabis use that did result in paranoia, psychosis, and severe agitation. This referral was beneficial because they told us where his problematic attitude may be coming from and why he should stop using synthetic cannabis.

Parent/Guardian 7 also expressed appreciation for the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program that his child was required to complete:

He [adolescent name omitted] did the juvenile firefighters program, which was good for him [adolescent name omitted], and he received many services. It was good for him because it gave him something to do other than be high all day. He [adolescent name omitted] was not too happy about attending the program, but it was good for him. It kept him busy and away from his bad influences (Parent 7).

Parent/Guardian 8 associated the adequacy of the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program with counseling referrals: “I feel that they had the right people in place and could steer you to the right resources. When we started this program, they told me they would work with other social services to assess and evaluate the child’s specific needs.”

Parent/Guardian 12 also expressed gratitude for a mental health referral, saying it helped her son, especially the grief counseling:

The juvenile firesetters program helped me by getting my kid additional help and testing and enabled us to identify the core problem. They referred us to social workers and began treating my son with grief counselors. Unfortunately, what happened to him and witnessing his dad's whole situation, he [adolescent name omitted] finally got services for grieving the loss of his father. Child protective services, in addition to the social workers and the fire marshal assigned to our case, were able to get help for him, help that I was not able to provide. This helped identify the core issue that we were dealing with, which was my son's inability to deal with the loss of his father. I was upset when he [adolescent name omitted] was arrested and angered by the judge sending him to this program, but this was the best thing for him under the circumstances.

**Theme 3: The Current Intervention and Prevention Program Was Perceived as Inadequate When Staff With the Necessary Expertise in Addressing Alcohol and Cannabis Abuse Were Unavailable.** Six parents/guardians (1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12; 50%) contributed to this theme. Parent/guardian 1 indicated that the services were inadequate when staff at the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program were not trained to treat mental health issues that were required to help children with mental health issues:

It was a struggle to get my child the right services and ensure you know you could get your child help with the underlining issues that contributed to their firesetting behavior. Still, they could not identify or address those underlining issues, so they referred us to get outside services or left it up to us to devise a treatment plan. It

was challenging to find those mental health services but having a child with an alcohol or drug dependency as the root cause of their delinquency was quite different from a child that does not have mental health issues in addition to firesetting behavior (Parent/Guardian 1).

Parent/guardian 1 explained that the staff was trained but that even with the properly trained staff at the juvenile firesetting program, the fire Academy may not be the right environment for treating children that set fires and have an alcohol or drug problem:

From what I saw in accompanying my child through this program, we deal with many more adolescents who set deliberate fires and have an underlining substance abuse problem. The program staff ensured they sought trained counselors and better training for themselves. Still, I feel that the staff were sometimes not even close to having the proper training to address an underlining alcohol or drug issue that was accompanying my child's destructive firesetting behavior.

Parent/Guardian 2 perceived the experience to address the mental health issues that affected the child or influenced the child to set fires, as an insufficient number of staff members capable of conducting a mental health assessment and treating a juvenile who sets fires under the influence of alcohol or cannabis:

One of the main downfalls of the program was the lack of mental health-trained staff at the fire academy, which is why the process took so long to get my child into a treatment program. Only a few psychiatrists within this county could offer juvenile help with substance abuse and firesetting. Once I sought psychiatric help outside of the city, some of the rural areas in the county required a 3 to 6-month wait before any treatment or medication was offered (Parent/Guardian 2).

Parent/Guardian 3 agreed with Parents/Guardians 1 and 2 and explained an inadequate number of trained staff to assess identifying alcohol and cannabis abuse by an adolescent firesetter in the hopes of treating and deterring future juvenile fireplay.

Parent/guardian 3 emphasizes that juvenile firesetters with mental health issues were often referred to get help outside the program. There were not enough resources and places where my juvenile could get help for his underlining problems that contributed to him setting fires. The juvenile firesetting reinvestment program was the one place that attempted to treat all of the issues that surrounded the destructive fireplay:

There needed to be more places or resources in the area to help my child figure out why they set fires. The juvenile firesetting prevention and intervention program here at the fire academy was one of those few places that try to intervene with a child's underlining issues that contribute to their fireplay. The parents or guardians had to get a court order because many places require a court order to be accepted and treated for free as an adolescent firesetter. Still, these places do not treat or were not expert enough to treat destructive firesetting tendencies. I have spoken to other parents as I have accompanied my child through this program.

Many parents could not voluntarily get their children into the program; often, they had to wait until they went in front of a judge and got ordered. (Parent/Guardian 3).

Parent/Guardian 8 offered to the conversation a response that acknowledged the inadequacies of the existing reinvestment services, all the while affirming that the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention staff were becoming more skilled in identifying the mental health needs of the youthful offenders entering the program:

As a parent, I feel the juvenile justice system was not set up to help my child. After accompanying him through this program, I think that juvenile justice was moving more toward treating adolescents and not simply a place to lock them up. I am unsure if this program was the answer for all kids who commit crimes, but I know that locking kids up was not the answer. I would recommend a more individualized approach to treatment with specific counselors to handle particular problems. I felt this would create the most favorable outcome. The most challenging obstacle to overcome with my son was getting him the proper diagnosis and then seeking the appropriate program for his treatment (Parent/Guardian 4).

Parents/Guardians 9 and 12 offered that the juvenile firesetter intervention and prevention program staff effectively assessed his child's mental health needs and that his child lived in a complex home environment. The most challenging part was repeatedly trying to get him into the right program:

The most challenging problem for me and my kid was trying to convince the powers in charge that my child needed help and to get him into a program voluntarily. Now that he has completed the program, the juvenile firesetters reinvestment staff did an excellent job in trying to offer behavioral and mental health providers. We are fortunate to have been accepted into this program, and I am willing to do whatever is needed to make him a better person and fix our family dynamics. It is not just a kid's problem. It is a family problem, and it should be addressed that way. The program staff needed our help to figure out what was causing his dangerous firesetting behavior (Parent/Guardian 9).

Parent/Guardian 12 perceives that the juvenile justice system is mainly set up to punish and not set up for diversion:

The staff at the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program here at the fire academy do a great job once they get to know your child and realize the underlying condition causing them to set fires. It took me a long time to understand how grief transformed and affected my child's entire world. It is like peeling layers away until you get down to what is bothering your child and making them act out.

**Theme 4: Program Staff Is Perceived as Effective at Identifying Adolescents Who Abuse Alcohol and Cannabis and Need Services.** Three parents/guardians (8, 9, 12; 25%) contributed to this theme. Parent/Guardian 8 perceived that the juvenile firesetters' intervention and prevention staff have sufficient ability to recognize children who need assistance with mental health issues and substance abuse and that the fire academy staff are effective at treating children who have been diverted to the program and work very hard to keep them out of jail:

I feel that the juvenile firesetters reinvestment staff are good at fixing abnormal fireplay in children once it has been determined through outside services what the child needs. The program can identify young people's alcohol and cannabis use through the people in place now. The more adolescents the program receives with mental illness cases or alcohol and cannabis abuse, the better the community will become rather than throwing them away in the prison system. If a child is not court-ordered into the program through family or criminal courts like my child, they become lost in the system. They often do not receive help for their alcohol or cannabis abuse. Still, when they arrive at the juvenile firesetters program at the

fire academy, the staff quickly look deeper into any underlining issues and refer the child to the appropriate services. They strictly monitor their progress both in the juvenile firesetters program and through outside social services (Parent/Guardian 8).

Parent/Guardian 9 offered the perception that acknowledged the inadequacies of existing intervention and prevention services while affirming that the juvenile firesetters program staff are very good at establishing which children have mental health issues and are abusing alcohol and cannabis.

By now, the program is more of a treatment than punishment. Implementing this type of program with the available social services and the use of outside counselors and agencies is essential and will continue to make a difference (Parent/Guardian 9).

Parent/Guardian 12 offered that the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention staff effectively recognized my child's mental health issues, how grief-stricken he is, and how this led to his destructive firesetting behavior to gain attention:

The staff did a great job in trying to offer grief counseling and other mental health services through outside providers while at the same time monitoring his progress both in and out of the program. We were fortunate to have a fire marshal [Fire Marshal name omitted] and other staff members willing to say he is not a bad kid but needs real help. They never saw him as someone that would get drunk or high and then set a fire. They tried to figure out what was causing the problem (Parent/Guardian 12).

**Theme 5: The Program Staff Effectively Works With Behavioral Health**

**Services to Provide Interventions and Prevention.** Nine parents/guardians (1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12; 75%) contributed to this theme. Parents/Guardians 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 12 perceived that the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program is more effective at communicating with outside counseling services and vice versa to ensure that adolescents within the program receive the individualized and specific help they require:

I think the staff works hard to get my adolescent the needed help and our good at identifying underlying issues that lead to my child's firesetting behavior (Parent 1). I know from my own experiences that they separated children and adults into two different systems. However, what I like about this program is that it treats the family and the offender as a whole and tries to identify behavioral needs (Parent 3). I learned a lot in this program because they require the parent to accompany the adolescent and offer services to the entire family if the need is there and if it will help address the adolescent's destructive behavior (Parent 4). The juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program is unlike any services I have attended with my child, and it is hard to address the child's individual behavioral needs. Still, they ensure that the family contributes to the child's positive growth and help the whole family throughout the journey (Parent 6). I feel that the program never gave up on my child even though he committed criminal acts; they encouraged him to change his life for the better while at the same time instilling the need to reconcile and to be a better person (Parent 7). The juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program staff are good at identifying juveniles with mental health issues. I am grateful that my child was diverted from juvenile court

to this program (Parent 8). I think the fire marshal's office staff are good at going into the schools, talking to the children and the teachers, and reaching out to parents who feel a child is at risk for setting fires (Parent 9). From what I have seen so far, this program works well. Rather than putting my kid into the system, they can get him services, even therapy and counseling, and find out why the kid started setting fires in the first place (Parent 10). I think the system is getting better at identifying kids with behavioral problems and looking to setting fires as a way of getting help. Unfortunately, I am familiar with the juvenile justice system and believe this program is better than simply putting my kid into the system. I have seen that the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program works very well. Rather than merely putting my kid in the system, the fire marshal's office staff could get him services, including therapy and counseling resources that I did not know existed or were available to us (Parent 12).

**Theme 6: The Program Staff Lack Training to Make Interventions and Prevention Services Adequate.** Three parents ( 2, 5, and 11; 25%) contributed to this theme. Parent 2 attributed the inadequacies of treatment in the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program to inadequate training and knowledge of the staff to understand an adolescent's processing of complex experiences and feelings when exposed to higher negative emotions when engaging with different types of media and exposure to violence during Black Lives Matter demonstrations:

Historically, I do not think there has been a sort of influence like Black Lives Matter to produce a higher negative emotion, anger, or willingness to engage in

destructive behavior in my child's life more than in the Black Lives Matter movement. I have never seen in my adult life between TV, Facebook, Snapchat, cable TV, and the media, in general, something so powerful as to capture my child's interest in an obsessive way that it is OK to be destructive and set fires in the name of a perceived cause more than the Black Lives Matter movement. My kid got sucked into it being home from school during the pandemic. It is all that was watched and all that was influenced upon my child's mind. For this reason, my kid decided to go out and set fires and engage in destructive behavior under the guise of racial equality (Parent 2). So it is taking so much of my time to work with my kid and to get them to understand that you do not solve any problems by resorting to violence. Still, when they are so young, you can teach them to de-escalate, but all they see on TV and all these social media is that it is OK to go out and be destructive and set fires in the name of social justice (Parent 5). I do not think adolescents can think of the consequences of their actions like adults do. You see a wrong repeatedly portrayed on TV and social media, and when you are young, you act and do not think (Parent 11).

### ***Triangulation and Summary, RQ1***

The first research question was: What are the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program? The data analysis from the parent/guardian interviews informs us that the current intervention and prevention program is perceived as inadequate when applied without input from the adolescent's parent or guardian but is perceived as adequate when used with the information provided by these most critical

stakeholders. Analysis of the data derived from the parent/guardian interviews indicates that the current intervention and prevention program is perceived as inadequate when staff with the necessary expertise in addressing alcohol and cannabis abuse are unavailable. Triangulation of the data from the parent/guardian interviews indicated that these stakeholders believe that the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention staff were effective at providing referrals but that the program staff lacked the training to assist juveniles suffering from behavioral and mental health issues and that referrals in juvenile diversion into this program may be ineffective when behavioral services do not accompany the adolescent throughout the program and are not made available to both the parent/guardian as well as the youthful offender for long term treatment.

Analysis of the parent/guardian interviews data indicated that program staff is perceived as effective at identifying adolescents who abuse alcohol or cannabis and need services but that the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program staff do not have enough training to make interventions and prevention services adequate. Analysis of the parent/guardian interview data informs us that the program staff effectively works with behavioral health services to provide interventions and prevention. Still, there are not enough out-of-program services available to maintain adequate reinvestment. Further analysis of the data collected from the parent/guardian interviews indicates that the program staff does not have enough training to make interventions and prevention services adequate to continue affecting positive social outcomes. Triangulation of the parent/guardian interviews data confirms that the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program is effective at identifying youthful offenders with mental health and

behavioral issues but that this staff does not have sufficient training to meet the treatment needs of those young fire offenders.

In perspective, the answer to the first research question is that the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program is adequate at identifying youth with behavioral issues and giving referrals to providers for intervention and prevention services. Of significance, the fire marshal's staff do not have the training to provide adequate interventions and prevention services themselves, and providers who work within the program's constraints do not provide good services when they do not accept parent or guardian input or provide consistent long-term reinvestment services.

### **Research Question 2**

Research question 2 is: What were the parents and guardians of adolescents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program? This presentation of results related to the second research question is from the perspective of the most important stakeholder of the child and the community: the adolescent's parent/guardian. Within the presentation of results for research question 2, as in research question 1, this researcher has organized the results by theme.

#### ***Parents/Guardians***

Five themes emerged during the data analysis from this stakeholder group related to research question 2. The first theme was: *Parents and guardians suggest that the program's services address all aspects of the adolescent's life.* The second theme was: *Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommend adapting tools to assess better a youth abusing alcohol and cannabis.* The third theme was: *Parents and guardians of*

*juvenile firesetters recommend that youth with mental health issues be addressed separately from other adolescent offenders.* The fourth theme was: *Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommended increasing the staff trained to assess and treat youth with alcohol and cannabis dependency.* The fifth theme was: *Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommend incorporating critical thinking skills and independence into the program's curriculum.*

**Theme 1: Parents and Guardians Suggest That the Program's Services Address All Aspects of the Adolescent's Life.** All 12 parents/guardians (100%) contributed to this theme.

Parents/guardians 1, 2, and 3 recommended that juvenile firesetting prevention and investment outreach services begin in the public school system to identify at-risk youth:

I think the schools need to have more of a mentoring program with law enforcement officers and fire people where they focus not only on going into grammar schools but continue an influence through middle school and high school to help those kids that are like my child [child's name omitted] to understand the dangers of mixing drugs and alcohol with setting fires to get their kicks and the consequences associated with such risky behavior (Parent/Guardian 1).

My kid struggled with confidence and was looking for role models but found the wrong influences. I wish there were more police and fire people in the schools to mentor and steer kids away from the destructive forces that surround them within

our schools, like skipping class and smoking weed and playing with fire (Parent/Guardian 2).

My child never had a positive role model as a police officer or a firefighter. Now and then, my child would tell me that they came to the school and talked about the dangers of drugs and alcohol and to ask mommy or daddy to test the smoke alarm now and then. Still, my kid never had the chance to get positive attention until they were in trouble, and then it was too late (Parent/Guardian 3).

By having more positive role models in our school system, like police officers and firefighters, the schools can help to keep you from becoming involved in the juvenile justice system by maintaining students apprised of what can get them in trouble and how to stay out of it according to parents/guardians 4, and 5:

There should be more hands-on, real-world problem-solving. If we had more programs and good mentors for the kids to keep them excited and engaged, more of them would seek mentorships from public servants (Parent/Guardian 4).

I would like to see police and fire mentor programs like you see with military programs like JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps). This would help kids stay more focused, have a positive outlook on their future, and, most importantly, keep them from being bored and looking for outlets (Parent/Guardian 5).

When children become involved in fireplay, parent/guardian 6 felt that the juvenile justice system should take more severe measures to impress youth with the seriousness of their disruptive behavior:

Early on, my child was setting fires, but because of their age, little to no action took place. On some occasions, as the parent and guardian, I was not even aware of any contact with law enforcement or the fire marshal's office until it became dire. I think there were at least one or two incidences that I was unaware of in which they were setting fires. I feel like all they did was let my child stay out there until it was too late or too big of a deal to sweep under the rug. Right now, the kids have the law on their side because there are no repercussions for their malicious firesetting behavior (Parent/guardian 6).

Parent/Guardian 7 believed that the juvenile justice system should have a way to treat not only the child but the child's family as well because it is the parent or guardian that needs to intervene for the best interest and positive outcome of the child:

The system is not set up to help the family as a whole. Unfortunately, some people need help on how to handle their children or how to influence their children positively. Ultimately children like my kid have unhealthy family relationships, and there needs to be a way for the juvenile justice system to treat the entire family. The system needs to be more strict, not only on the juvenile but also on the parent or guardian, to help and invest in a kid's positive outcome. The juvenile justice system remarkably got my kid into the young firesetters program. Still, the most challenging part is getting into the program, and it appears the only way to do that is to be on your way to going to jail. Simply letting my child off the hook for setting some small fires did nothing but leave him more susceptible to probably going to prison (Parent/Guardian 7).

Parent/Guardian 8 recommended that some form of behavioral help be provided for justice-involved adolescence who are being remanded or court-ordered to the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program. Parent/Guardian 8 explained the perception of her child's experience:

One thing I recommend to any parent who gets their child into this program is that they need to be involved and understand that they have to do the work outside of the program and be on top of their child to finish it. Like in my current situation, if I do not go to work, I do not get paid, and my boss does not understand or be sympathetic to my family problems. My child needs help, and he needs me on top of them to ensure they are doing the right thing and staying out of trouble, but sometimes I cannot attend the program sessions with them because of work. Having a fire marshal or a counselor assigned to the individual child and their family would help, especially when the parent or guardian cannot attend the program for that day (Parent/Guardian 8).

Parents and guardians 9, 10, 11, and 12 perceived that caretakers can assist their at-risk children by responding appropriately to their children's misuse of fire:

As a parent, when you start to see something wrong, you should attempt by any means necessary to get your child help. If this means calling the fire marshal's office or your local police station and asking for help, you must keep at it and advocate for your child (Parent/Guardian 9).

Many of the parents I became familiar with through this program, like myself, ignored the child's fire play justifying it as they are only going through a phase and it is not a real problem (Parent/Guardian 10).

I need help understanding this system. When they are young, their fire play is not a problem, but when they become teenagers or young adults, their firesetting suddenly becomes a considerable problem (Parent/Guardian 11).

The juvenile firesetters reinvestment program helped me identify the early warning signs and how to intervene and advocate for getting your child help (Parent/Guardian 12).

**Theme 2: Parents and Guardians of Juvenile Firesetters Recommend Adapting Tools to Assess Better a Youth Abusing Alcohol and Cannabis.** Six parents/guardians (50%) contributed to this theme. Parent 2 recommended adopting a juvenile firesetting screening questionnaire to assess all levels of the adolescent's knowledge of malicious fire play:

Getting our children considered early for this program might help us prevent future destructive behavior and limit our kid's exposure to getting in trouble and being put into the system (Parent/Guardian 2).

Parent/Guardian 4 noted that a juvenile firesetters screening questionnaire would allow the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program staff to understand the child's issues and to get them the resources specific to their needs. Parent/guardian 4 reiterated that training would be needed for the fire Marshal's staff to administer some valid screening questionnaires effectively:

They need to develop a questionnaire to be utilized in the schools and followed up by the fire marshal's office. However, they will need to properly train the fire marshal's office staff to recognize signs and symptoms that the child is at risk for setting destructive fires. As a parent, if I had known the signs earlier, this would

have hopefully prevented my child from entering the system, and this early treatment could have set him down a better path (Parent/Guardian 4).

Parent/Guardian 6 proposed that a professional with the expertise be placed onto the fire marshal staff to provide behavioral health assessments for youthful fire offenders coming into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program:

I propose that more behavioral experts be placed in the current program. By doing so, you can explain to the parent or guardian more professionally why the child needs intervention for setting fires. The present fire marshal's staff is good at general counseling and identifying a problem. Still, they cannot give a specific diagnosis and treatment. They cannot link up appropriate services, which can ultimately get to the root of the issue and why the juvenile is setting fires in the first place (Parent/Guardian 6).

Parent/Guardian 7 perceives that every child should be assessed upon their immediate or initial contact with the juvenile justice system and not simply given a pass because of their age:

Any juvenile fire screening questionnaire or at-risk for firesetting assessment needs to be given to any child that engages in malicious fire play regardless of age. Any contact with the school, law enforcement, or fire officials by a juvenile suspected of setting an intentional fire needs to be more than brushed away. It needs to be followed up with an assessment. At this point, early intervention and placement into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program could dramatically change a child's life in a positive way (Parent/Guardian 7).

Parent/Guardian 9 perceived that most children in the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program have experienced prior trauma and lack an assessment and diagnosis:

I would insist on an assessment and diagnosis for every child that enters this juvenile firesetters reinvestment program. I know I missed the signs that my child was struggling with traumatic issues. I think an evaluation and diagnosis early on when they started setting small insignificant fires would have made a considerable difference in where they are today. I now know that there are specific assessments and ways to get therapy, but it took multiple cries for help through the setting of malicious fires for the system to truly help us and get us into this program  
(Parent/Guardian 9)

Parent/Guardian 12 perceived that the benefits of adopting a valid juvenile fire screening questionnaire should be administered in school to not only grammar school students but to all middle schoolers and high schoolers:

Adapting and utilizing such a fire screening tool through the formative schooling years is of the utmost importance. Instead of a beginning for us in the juvenile justice system, if I had inclined that my kid was at-risk for setting fires, I would have been able to figure out what the problem was and how to get them help and avoid the mess we are in now. It has not benefited my child to have been let off the hook by the county sheriff and local law enforcement as curiosity and juvenile mischief because if my kid had been referred to the fire marshal's program at the onset of the firesetting tendencies he might have received the proper treatment sooner and his role in the juvenile justice system would be less a formality.

**Theme 3: Parents and Guardians of Juvenile Firesetters Recommend That Youth With Mental Health Issues Be Addressed Separately From Other Adolescent Offenders.** Six parents/guardians (1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 12; 50%) contributed to this theme.

Parent/Guardian 1 perceived that creating a reliable behavioral assessment for juvenile firesetters rather than simply ordering them to complete an all-encompassing one size fits all program would be better suited, more specifically, toward the individuals.

This would be best if the system were set up to have the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program work with behavioral health professionals. It would be great if a kid could get help within this program before he recommits a delinquent act. This would allow the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program to work with a kid before putting him into the juvenile court system. I know that as a parent, the frustration is that before you can get him help through the courts, he has to be in trouble and appear as a delinquent. When the juvenile is diverted to the juvenile firesetters prevention and investment program, the fire marshal's office is to supervise their case. However, this becomes an issue because the fire marshal's office lacks the skills or resources to meet the needs of children with behavioral or mental health problems. The fire marshal's office is not trained to do this, and the court sometimes expects them to know what to do in each behavioral or mental health situation (Parent/Guardian 1).

Parent/Guardian 2 also recommended that the fire marshal's office receive dedicated resources to help youthful offenders of fire with behavioral and mental health issues:

When it comes to juvenile firesetters, there is an alternative way to reinvest. In a perfect world, the fire marshal's office has staff trained and specialized in juvenile firesetting and behavioral and mental health care. This would help not only the child but the parents and the schools. This way, the kids with cognitive and behavioral health issues would not interfere with the other kids attending the juvenile firesetters program. The juvenile firesetting reinvestment program would have therapists and psychiatric staff intertwined within the fire marshal's office. I feel as a parent that if we had something like this in place, it would benefit not only the child but the adolescent's family and the community as a whole (Parent/Guardian 2).

Parent/Guardian 3 recommended that juveniles participating in the firesetting reinvestment program be separated to prevent further victimization or indoctrination by other youthful offenders:

It would be ideal if the staff could separate behavioral and mental health-diagnosed adolescence from the other youthful offenders. In addition to dealing with my child's destructive behavior, we also had to cope with bullying along with other youth peers trying to indoctrinate her into their delinquent group (Parent/Guardian 3).

Parent/Guardian 6 aligned with the perceptions of parents/guardians 2 and 3 in that their perceptions of youth with behavioral issues have an increased risk of victimization or indoctrination when placed together in the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program among other generally justice-involved youth:

My kid has behavioral issues, which is a daily struggle, but placing him in a program with more violent and drug-dependent youthful offenders that do not have mental health issues seems to make my child struggle more in the program. When my kid is grouped in with other more violent young offenders that do not have mental health and behavioral issues, it makes my kid more of a target and does not help with any progress (Parent/Guardian 6).

Parent/Guardian 8 perceived that creating separate groups within the existing program to handle both behavioral and mental health issues, as well as alcohol and cannabis dependency, that are united to address the adolescent firesetting behavior makes the program more specific and less general:

The program needs more behavioral and mental health professionals to work among the fire academy staff. The program needs to offer services more specific to juvenile behavioral and mental health issues as they do for identifying alcohol and cannabis dependency. I think the program would benefit from more behavioral and mental health professionals among the fire marshal's staff (Parent/Guardian 8).

Parent/Guardian 12 had similar perceptions as parents/guardians 1, 2, 3, 6, and 8 in that they recommend the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program over other diversion programs:

I like the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program. It works and is beneficial. I learned that it is essential to recognize early if your child has a behavioral or mental health issue and that you must become your child's advocate to receive special services because the alternative is you lose them to the system, which

prefers incarceration over diversion programs. I feel programs like this are the key to keeping behavioral and mental health youth out of our prisons. Law enforcement is the key, but they must communicate better with the fire marshal's office. The courts must listen to the youth custodians because our input is valuable but often not heard (Parent/Guardian 12).

**Theme 4: Parents and Guardians of Juvenile Firesetters Recommend**

**Increasing the Staff Trained to Assess and Treat Youth With Alcohol and Cannabis**

**Dependency.** Six parents/guardians (1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8; 50%) contributed to this theme.

Parent/Guardian 1 spoke of the need for more behavioral services and for more help with adolescence who are cannabis dependent: "I wish the program offered more access to therapists and psychologists as well as incorporating help with the growing cannabis problem among today's youth." Parent/Guardian 2 agreed with parent/guardian 1, perceiving a need for more psychiatrists and therapists to help teenagers to learn to think for themselves and not to be so dependent on group affiliation, which sometimes leads to their indoctrination into radicalized groups:

Through my child's development within the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program, I have seen that these kids need more psychiatric help and more counselors to teach them independence and that it is OK to be a self-thinker and not follow the group. Also, there is a greater need for this program to tackle the problem of excessive cannabis use, which my 15-year-old son and his friends, unbeknownst to me, were continuously using (Parent/Guardian 2).

Parent/Guardian 3 recommended including a psychiatrist and therapist be on staff at the fire academy during the sessions in which the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program is given:

A therapist and psychologist would benefit the youth and the fire marshal staff during the intervention and prevention sessions of the juvenile firesetters program. This would be a great benefit to my teenage daughter. She has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and uses cannabis excessively to help her cope and function throughout the day. I know as a mother that if my daughter had access to a therapist, this would be critical to treating her mental health diagnosis and aiding the program staff in correcting her abnormal firesetting behavior.

(Parent/Guardian 3).

Parent/Guardian 4 recommended increasing the number of counselors, therapists, and psychiatrists to work with the juvenile firesetter reinvestment staff:

Having a psychiatrist, therapist, or a good counselor assigned to the fire marshals' staff would make a big difference in how the program handles my daughter's traumatic past. I feel that she started down the wrong path after she was raped, and her excessive cannabis use is just a way to mask the underlining trauma that she has experienced. In my daughter's case, having more trauma-informed counselors and therapists available would lead to better positive results, at least in my daughter's case (Parent/Guardian 4).

The number of personnel trained in behavioral and mental health issues, including drug and alcohol dependency, could be increased within the juvenile firesetters

reinvestment program by providing additional training to the current fire marshal's office staff:

The fire academy staff are very knowledgeable about youth firesetting and are good at finding the underlining issue that complements malicious fire play. Still, they seem naïve to what triggers my child's behavioral outbreaks and why she uses cannabis to escape. I feel that the fire marshal's office and the staff at the fire academy are incredibly dedicated. I think that they should be able to receive training to provide better therapy and counseling in addition to the dangers of malicious fire play (Parent/Guardian 3).

Parent/Guardian 7 recommended increasing the number of counselors, therapists, and psychiatrists working among the staff at the juvenile firesetters program:

I feel that there is a lack of coordination between the fire marshal's office and the available social services of the county. From what I have seen in this program, there are not enough behavioral and mental health professionals accompanying the adolescent throughout the program session. At one of the group sessions, I asked the attending counselor what their take was on my child's misbehaving and was informed that they were filling in for the day and that they usually work with adults. I think the program needs more juvenile-specific providers, but it is apparent that there are not enough of these services available (Parent/Guardian 7).

Parent/Guardian 8 perceived that the program requires more training in the intervention and prevention services for behavioral and mental health issues and drug and alcohol addiction:

I do not think there are enough specialized counselors to provide youth services, especially for a child like mine who already has a cannabis dependency compounded by behavioral issues at a young age. Again, I think there needs to be more training in mental health and behavioral problems and drug and alcohol dependency intervention training for all the staff members interacting with these kids (Parent/Guardian 8).

**Theme 5: Parents and Guardians of Juvenile Firesetters Recommended**

**Incorporating Critical Thinking Skills Into the Program's Curriculum.** Three parents/guardians (2, 5, and 11; 25%) contributed to this theme. Parent/guardian 2 perceives that his 15-year-old child became indoctrinated into a radicalized group that robbed him of his independence and critical thinking ability:

I think there needs to be some assessment, either by a therapist or counselor, as to who influences our children. Over the last two years, my 15-year-old child became desensitized to all the violence on cable television and the news networks during this pandemic. He spent his time at home watching all the news stations and somehow, unbeknownst to me, felt obligated to become an activist. On the wall in his bedroom is a poster titled “13 Black Lives Matter Guiding Principles” many of them appear harmless and teach children about empathy and loving people of all backgrounds. Others, however, encourage activism by any means, even if it requires you to break the law. My child deliberately set a fire in his school to protest the social injustice that he believes is rampant throughout our society. My recommendation as a parent is for this program to incorporate skills

that teach youth the importance of being strong and independent through critical thinking and how to avoid being used by others (Parent/Guardian 2).

Parent/Guardian 5 explained the program's benefit for adapting a critical thinking assessment tool and teaching the invaluable skills of self-worth and independence to juvenile firesetters:

My daughter's behavioral and mental health issues robbed her of her freedom. Her cannabis dependency robbed her of her ability to be a critical thinker. I wish the program would incorporate the teaching of skills that were geared toward critical thinking and independence. I feel that she was indoctrinated into the Black Lives Matter culture, and they did nothing but use her and take advantage of her lack of independence and wanting so much to be a part of something. Her belonging to such a movement gave her a sense of purpose, no matter how obscure the message. It also steered her to a path that landed her in the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program through diversion for her intentional firesetting (Parent/Guardian 5).

Parent/Guardian 11 continued to commit that her daughter was here for the wrong reasons and appeared not to be bothered by her child's intentional firesetting act that brought her to the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program by diversion from the juvenile justice system. This parent's perception that her daughter's indoctrination into a radicalized group was good adds to the data presented by theme five, reiterating the need for the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program to add a skills curriculum that focuses on critical thinking and independence:

My daughter was court-ordered to complete this juvenile firesetters reinvestment program. It is not my daughter's fault. The government continues to conspire against anybody affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement, and she was exercising her peaceful right to protest. It was your typical abuse by law enforcement that had her here. I am proud she was involved with this group and its fight against racial injustice (Parent/Guardian 11).

***Triangulation and Summary, RQ2***

The second research question was: What were the parents and guardians of adolescents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program? Data from the parent and guardian interviews indicated five recommendations: the first recommendation was that the program's services address all aspects of adolescents' life and that outreach services begin in the public school system to identify at-risk youth. By enhancing the roles of police officers and firefighters within our public school system, educators can positively influence their students and help steer them away from some negative influences. Parents and guardians perceived that caretakers, school officials, law enforcement, and the fire service could assist at-risk children by responding appropriately when a juvenile intentionally starts a fire and not brushing it off as simple child's play. Triangulation of the data from parent and guardian interviews indicates that, quite often, malicious firesetting by adolescents is ignored, and rationalized, simply as curiosity and often viewed by the juvenile justice system as decriminalized mischief. The data acquired from the parent and guardian interviews informed the researcher of the need for more programs and good mentors for kids to keep them excited and engaged and

help more of them with acquiring mentorship from public servants. The stakeholder's perception was to increase police and fire mentor programs, as seen with already existing in-school quasi-military programs like JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps) that have the potential to help keep kids focused and around positive role models that can keep them from being bored and looking for other outlets. The second recommendation by parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters was to adopt a better tool for assessing if a youth was abusing alcohol, cannabis, or both. Triangulation of the data informs that the perceptions of parents and guardians were that a juvenile firesetters screening questionnaire would allow the program staff to understand the child's issues better and to get them the resources specific to their needs. Implementing this recommendation would require advanced training for the fire marshal's office staff to recognize the signs and symptoms that a child was at risk of not only setting fires but abusing alcohol and cannabis. The stakeholder's perception was to utilize this questionnaire within the school system to identify at-risk offenders early and negate the risk of negative peer influences within the schools by increasing exposure to good role models through increased mentorship from law enforcement and fire service resources. Triangulation of the data suggested positive outcomes were greatest when the adolescent is first identified within the school system or with their first contact with law enforcement, the fire service, or the juvenile justice system. The third recommendation of parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters was that youth with behavioral and mental health issues be addressed separately from other adolescent offenders. The stakeholders perceived that creating a reliable behavioral assessment for adolescents who misuse fire, rather than simply ordering them to complete an all-encompassing one size fits all program, was better

suited and more specific for the individual youthful offender's needs. When it comes to juvenile firesetters, there were many alternative ways to reinvest, and the parents and guardians perceived that the fire marshal's office needed to dedicate more resources to help youthful offenders of fire with behavioral and mental health issues. Triangulation of the data informed that the parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters perceived that youthful fire offenders with behavioral issues have an increased risk of victimization and indoctrination into radicalized groups. The data further indicated that placing juvenile firesetters who identify with behavioral and mental health issues into a program comprised of general justice-involved youth further increases the possibilities of victimization and indoctrination. Triangulation of the acquired data reiterated that stakeholders continue to recommend the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program as a good juvenile diversion that produced better outcomes than incarceration. The fourth recommendation of parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters was to increase the fire marshal's office staff, who was trained to assess and treat youth with alcohol and cannabis dependency. Triangulation of the acquired data informs us that many adolescent firesetters experience cannabis addiction and underlining behavioral and mental health issues requiring an increase in the number of counselors, therapists, and psychiatrists within the fire marshal's office. The fifth recommendation by parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters was to incorporate critical thinking skills into the program's curriculum. The stakeholders perceived that today's at-risk youth are easily indoctrinated into radicalized groups that can take their independence and critical thinking ability from them. Triangulation of the data recommended that the parents and guardians of at-risk youth required an advanced program that incorporates skills that

teach youth the importance of being strong and independent through critical thinking and how to avoid being used by others. Data analysis of the parents' and guardians' perceptions was that the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program begins to address all aspects of adolescent life, including school, family, and peers, and that this reinvestment service should begin within the public school system, or at first contact with law enforcement, fire service personal or juvenile justice officials.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study aimed to examine the effectiveness of community-based juvenile firesetting programs through a custodial lens, being that the adolescent firesetting prevention and reform programs appear to be the most utilized youth diversion remedy among alternative sentencing initiatives. The researcher, to achieve this, conducted a one-on-one interview with 12 custodians of youthful offenders of fire utilizing two research questions to guide the study. The first research question was: *what are the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescence regarding the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program?*

Triangulation of the data from this stakeholder group indicated that the young firesetting reinvestment program is adequate at identifying youthful offenders of fire with behavioral and mental health issues and giving referrals to counselors, therapists, and psychiatrists for intervention and prevention services. However, the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program staff need the training to provide adequate intervention and prevention services at the fire academy. Behavioral health providers regularly utilized by the fire marshal's office do not offer satisfactory all-encompassing services, often do not accept stakeholder input, and cannot conduct long-term treatment and follow-up.

The second research question was: *what are the parents and guardians of adolescents' perceptions of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescence who attended the program?* Triangulation of the data from the stakeholder group indicated that a need exists to adopt a juvenile firesetter screening tool that is all-encompassing and assesses the youth through the school system, family environment, and peer influences and that this assessment and treatment include not only intentional juvenile firesetting but behavioral and mental health issues, including alcohol and cannabis, as well adolescents susceptibility to indoctrination into radicalized groups. Furthermore, youth identifying with behavioral and mental health issues require treatment separately from other justice-involved adolescence, and alternatives to incarceration, such as the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention programs, are increased to facilitate better training of program staff and the incorporation of outpatient facilities that offer counseling, therapy, and psychologist trained in juvenile trauma care.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The main problem regarding the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program is a lack of interventions and policies associated with the treatment and prevention services available at the fire marshal's office and the juvenile justice system for at-risk youth with trauma-inspired behavioral and mental health issues, which can complicate the treatment of these youthful offenders of fire (Luna & Wright, 2021; Martin et al., 2019; Peters & Freeman, 2020). These problems can lead to further traumatization, indoctrination, and a loss of independence and self-worth among juvenile offenders of fire who are already suffering from behavioral and mental health issues (Kratcoski et al., 2019). Adolescent firesetting and prevention programs appear to be the most used intervention available to communities in conjunction with fire prevention programs and alternative sentencing initiatives for youthful offenders of fire. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to examine the effectiveness of community-based juvenile firesetting reinvestment programs through the perspective of the most critical stakeholders, the adolescents' parents or guardians. Data collected focused on these stakeholders' perceptions of a community-based juvenile firesetting reinvestment program through a custodial lens in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. The main goal was to understand adolescent malicious firesetting behavior better and to assess a current juvenile firesetting reinvestment treatment program to identify what was working and what was not and to allow future researchers to build on working methods that promote positive social change within an all-encompassing community-based curriculum. The participants included 12 parents/guardians of justice-

involved youthful fire offenders. The interviews were voluntary and analyzed using a six-step procedure for thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2019).

Two research questions were used to guide the qualitative study:

RQ1: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement in successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program?

RQ2: What were the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program?

The analysis revealed themes based on the perspectives of the parents/guardians of justice-involved youthful fire offenders. RQ1 explored the perceptions of parents and guardians of their adolescents regarding the impact of their custodial involvement in successful outcomes of their child within the juvenile firesetting program. Triangulated data for the theme revealed in RQ1 showed that the current juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program is perceived as inadequate when applied without input from the adolescents' parent or guardian. Despite this, the participants perceived that the current juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program yields positive results and is adequate when used with the information provided by the adolescents' custodian or caretaker. Moreover, the participants perceived the need for more training to give the fire marshal's office staff appropriate intervention and prevention services and that recommendations from all community stakeholders should be considered in these interventions.

RQ2 addressed the parents and guardians of adolescents and how they perceived the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on custodial experiences and observations of their adolescents who attended the program.

Triangulation of the data from these participants revealed that there is a need to create and utilize a validated risk and needs assessment tool to assess and identify potential youthful fire offenders within the public school system. The parents and guardians of these at-risk juvenile fire offenders perceived that by utilizing such an assessment tool, an improvement in positive youthful outcomes is possible and would be enhanced through the further training of the fire marshal's office staff to assess behavioral and mental health issues better primarily in the area of trauma-informed juvenile care. Furthermore, the participants perceived the need for segregating the general justice-involved youthful fire offender from those young offenders of fire suffering from behavioral and mental health issues by creating and adapting diversion programs specifically to treat adolescent fire offenders with behavioral and mental health issues and by including better outpatient treatment and follow-up. Positive outcomes may be possible, but only if enough psychologists, skilled practitioners, and counselors trained in trauma-informed care, youth indoctrination, adolescent alcohol and cannabis use, and behavioral and mental health issues specific to juvenile firesetters are integrated into the fire marshal's office.

These results offer insight into the current perceived strengths and need for improvement of the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program specific to program participants who are justice-involved youthful fire offenders with behavioral and mental health issues. Furthermore, the results provide substance for possible policy and institutional changes that the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program should undertake

to provide more inclusive and adequate trauma-informed care for adolescent firesetters.

The following subsection reveals the themes that produced the results based on the current literature on juvenile firesetting. Moreover, the discussion is based on the research questions.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this subsection, each theme is discussed within a broader context of literature specific to juvenile firesetting, trauma-informed care for adolescent firesetters, and behavioral and mental health issues among youthful fire offenders. It is of utmost importance to understand how the most critical stakeholders (i.e., parents and guardians of youthful firesetters) perceived the adequacy of the current juvenile firesetters reinvestment program and to recognize areas for improvement to better provide appropriate intervention and prevention services for at-risk young fire offenders. The discussion is based on the research questions that guided this study. The first research question explored the participants' perceptions of how their involvement in the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program could influence successful outcomes for their youthful fire offenders. In contrast, the second research question determined different recommendations for improving the current juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program.

#### **Perceptions of the Juvenile Firesetters Intervention and Prevention Program**

As previously mentioned, RQ1 addressed how the parents and guardians perceived their involvement with the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program to the production of positive outcomes for their adolescent. The themes were separated based on the perceptions of the 12 custodians/stakeholders. This is an exciting concept because

in recognizing how parents and guardians perceived their involvement with the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program, the study provides a greater understanding of how each custodian interpreted their impact and detailed their lived experience with generalized justice-involved young firesetting offenders and those youthful fire offenders with additional issues in alcohol and cannabis abuse and behavioral and mental health issues.

Six themes emerged from the 12 custodian/stakeholder interviews related to the first research question:

1. The current intervention and prevention program is perceived as inadequate when applied without input from the adolescent's parent or guardian.
2. The current intervention and prevention program is perceived as adequate when used with information from the adolescent parent or guardian.
3. The current intervention and prevention program is perceived as inadequate when staff with the necessary expertise in addressing alcohol and cannabis abuse are unavailable.
4. Program staff is perceived as effective at identifying adolescents who abuse alcohol or cannabis and need services.
5. The program staff are effective at working with behavioral health services to provide interventions and prevention.
6. The program staff needs more training to make intervention and prevention services adequate.

The emergence of these themes shows how parents/guardians are concerned with the strict adherence to intervention guidelines and how alternatives to incarceration and

stakeholder input are valuable assets in treating at-risk youthful firesetters with behavioral and mental health issues. This supports the idea that the parent/guardian is essential to adolescent reinvestment services in cases of juvenile firesetting (Perks, Watt, Fritzo, & Doley, 2019). A clear understanding of behavioral and mental health issues in terms of juvenile firesetting is vital in the reinvestment process to accurately determine whether the adolescent is placed into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program with or without additional behavioral and mental health treatment (Perrin-Wallqvist & Norlander, 2020).

Regarding the parents/guardians, the value derived from themes focuses on stakeholder feedback and the stringency of the program's interventions and treatment. This aligns with the research findings of Peters and Freeman (2020) and indicates that a more comprehensive behavioral and mental health assessment requires a screening instrument that incorporates adolescent firesetting with juvenile psychosocial functions, cannabis and alcohol use, and behavioral and cognitive health characteristics and can assess for independence, self-worth, and critical thinking ability. This will help the fire marshal's office staff clarify the behavioral and mental health needs of youthful firesetting offenders and aid with setting up treatment plans that are more specific to the individual adolescent fire offender (Bradford & Dimock, 2019).

These themes indicate that the parents/guardians are more concerned with the abilities of the fire marshal's office staff in terms of their effectiveness or ineffectiveness in assessing the behavioral and mental health issues of youthful firesetting offenders. Moreover, based on these themes, the fire marshal's office, the sheriff's department, county police departments, the county fire service, and the county's juvenile justice

system need to focus on their staff competencies to address the adolescent firesetters' specific needs adequately. These themes reiterate a focus on the involvement of all community stakeholders, including the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program staff and all juvenile justice influencers, and how the capabilities and input of these different groups influence the quality of adolescent firesetting treatment.

These themes that emerged from the perceptions of parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters aligned with insight offered by Ahrens and Evarts (2020) and their idea that social and educational outcomes of adolescents who misuse fire require a centralized and focused administrator to ensure that the focus remains on the responsibility of all community stakeholders to ensure the safety and care of youthful fire offenders. The current juvenile firesetters reinvestment program is falling short of minimizing the traumatization experienced by young fire offenders. Because they are often placed into generalized juvenile justice diversion programs that lack specific capabilities and do not utilize skilled practitioners within the treatment parameters. Further evaluation of the themes demonstrated that the main focus of participating behavioral and mental health professionals involves the effectiveness of the current fire marshal's office staff and the lack of behavioral and mental health training provided to the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program staff. The parent/guardian perspectives offer supporting evidence of a relationship between traumatized youth and juvenile firesetting (Chen et al., 2019). A traumatic experience can hurt a child's development (Barreto & Boekamp, 2019). As such, it remains the chief fire marshal's responsibility to highlight the critical challenges in addressing juvenile firesetters' behavioral and mental health issues. The parent/guardian perspective aligns with the literature (Becker et al., 2020) in

that incarceration can induce further trauma to youthful fire offenders and that incarceration over diversion remains ineffective in treating adolescence who misuse fire—supporting the notion that behavioral and mental health treatment must be integrated into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program (Bosk et al., 2021). Many academic studies have presented data that neither incarceration nor turning a blind eye to malicious juvenile firesetting results in positive outcomes (Barreto & Boekamp, 2019). As such, the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program not only depends on multi-jurisdictional cooperation as well as a comprehensive and evidence-based treatment being offered but also requires a higher level of competency of the fire marshal's office staff in youth behavioral and mental health issues as well as youth alcohol and cannabis use treatment and requires the infusion of skilled juvenile practitioners into the program.

Triangulation of the emerging themes for RQ1 showed that all participants of this study perceived the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program staff in identifying youth with behavioral and mental health issues along with cannabis and alcohol dependency, but that the team did not have enough training to provide the intervention and prevention services needed to produce successful outcomes. Additionally, the stakeholders perceived effectiveness when the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention staff gathered input from the parents and guardians of these youthful fire offenders. This confirmed that it is critical that justice-involved young offenders of fire, especially those exposed to trauma and suffering from behavioral or mental health conditions and who are using alcohol and cannabis, receive the appropriate treatment during and after completing the program. The literature shows that children

with behavioral and mental health issues are more likely to externalize destructive firesetting tendencies that often lead them to be referred to the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program—furthering the need for program administrators to provide adequate risk and needs assessment to address the behavioral and mental health issues of youthful fire offenders, ensuring that these at-risk children will not be retraumatized (Faranda et al., 2019). The participants of this study perceived the vital role of behavioral and mental health training and the acquiring of skills to address youth abusing alcohol and cannabis to the fire marshal’s office staff to provide services to these justice-involved youthful fire offenders.

### **Improvements of the Juvenile Firesetters Intervention and Prevention Program**

Five themes emerged from the 12 custodian/stakeholder interviews related to the second research question. The value equates to improvements in the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program:

1. Parents and guardians suggest that the program's services address all aspects of the adolescent’s life.
2. Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommend adapting tools to assess better a youth abusing alcohol and cannabis.
3. Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommend that youth with mental health issues be addressed separately from other adolescent offenders.
4. Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommended increasing the staff trained to assess and treat youth with alcohol and cannabis dependency.

5. Parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommend incorporating critical thinking skills and a focus on independence and self-worth into the program's curriculum to deter youth indoctrination.

The juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program has struggled with best practices for addressing the needs of youthful firesetters. Due to the challenges associated with juvenile firesetting reinvestment, the stakeholders' perception is that justice-involved juvenile firesetting is aggravated with behavioral and mental health issues that are often compounded by alcohol and cannabis use, which can lead to youthful indoctrination; RQ2 offers a parent/guardian perception of the different areas of improvement regarding the current juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program. Similar to RQ1, the emerging themes are based on the perceptions of the juveniles' parents/guardians, who are the community's most valuable stakeholders.

One emerging theme demonstrated the perceived need for improvement within the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program from the perspective of the youthful fire offender's parent/guardian: Parents and guardians suggest that the program's services address all aspects of the adolescent's life. This reiterates how the parents'/guardians' perception of the improvements focuses on the overall well-being of their dependent, which is consequential from these stakeholders' perspectives. Moreover, this relates to how the parents/guardians perceived the adequacy of interventions and prevention services when input from these stakeholders is correlated with the betterment of behavioral and mental health services. This theme demonstrated that for parents/guardians, the welfare of their adolescent must be prioritized by the fire marshal's office by considering all aspects of the juvenile fire offender's life.

Such a perspective by the most critical stakeholders in juvenile firesetting reinvestment, children's parents/guardians, confirms the notion that these custodians are valued as social learning figures in such a way that they can produce strain, are critical to the reinvestment process and can either influence these at-risk juveniles to continue down a path of externalizing strain in the form of disruptive firesetting behavior or can promote redirecting toward a better way of life as a learned and productive member of the community skilled in critical and independent thinking (Agnew, 1992, 2013; Agnew & Kaufman, 2019). It was revealed by Becker, Steuwig, Herrerra, & McCloskey (2020) that traumatic experiences profoundly affect a child's mental development and mental adjustment and that trauma-informed care for incarcerated juvenile firesetters requires psychological and psychosocial interventions to be capable of addressing these specific therapeutic needs. Furthermore, literature by Butler and Davies (2020), Chen, Arria, and Anthony (2019), and Faranda (2018) enhanced the notion that a custodian can influence the child's identity, learning ability, and emotional responses to such a degree that parents/guardians must be integrated into all juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention treatment services. Derived from RQ2, the parent/guardian perceived value to these themes is that the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program must include the different aspects of the child's life, and input from all community stakeholders is essential in developing interventions and treatment protocols when seeking a positive social outcome.

Compared to the custodial concerns about the adolescent's overall well-being, the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters perceive that the fire marshal's office focuses more on the often complicated regulations and rules that make up juvenile justice

diversion. The parent/guardian perception is that the fire marshal's office focuses more on compliance and paperwork completion within the juvenile justice system. Nevertheless, the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program lacks instrumentation for an at-risk assessment, cannot offer a delineation of behavioral or mental health treatment and lacks quality and quantity of skilled practitioners in trauma-informed adolescent care. This kerfuffle between the county's juvenile justice administrators and staff at the fire marshal's office highlights a parent/guardian perception of an impersonal and institutionalized bureaucracy and continuous personnel changes that the stakeholders perceive to be detrimental to the treatment of juvenile firesetters within a justice-involved reinvestment program.

The themes derived from research question two are congruent to the behavioral, mental, emotional, and traumatic care needs of juvenile justice-involved fire offenders from the stakeholder's perspective. The perception of the parents/guardians of young fire offenders is that the youth themselves cannot procure the behavioral and mental health needs they require, making them more susceptible to the effects of their specific disorders. As a result, the fire marshal's office staff are tasked with providing sufficient intervention and prevention services for youth that often commit disruptive firesetting, a learned behavior and a way to externalize strain for their untreated behavioral and mental health issues (Ashraf et al., 2020). Policy changes involving the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program should entail the adoption of a certified risk and assessment tool and the development and training of all fire marshal's office staff in their roles as identifiers, documenters, and referrers of adolescent traumatic care procedures and needs to include placement of skilled practitioners within the fire marshal's office staff.

Another exciting idea derived from the perceptions of the parents/guardians of youthful fire offenders is that addressing the behavioral and mental health issues of youth who misuse fire should include dismissing a generalized solution and replacing it with an individualized and specific treatment program derived from a certified needs and assessment tool that focuses on juvenile firesetting.

Themes derived from research question one and research question two yelled similar perceptions from the parents and guardians interviewed with recommendations of a risk and needs assessment tool and traumatic care training for the fire marshal's office staff along with the inclusion of skilled practitioners into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program and ongoing treatment after program completion. Researchers often avoid studies examining juvenile justice, particularly justice-involved youth with behavioral and mental health issues, because of the many challenges associated with conducting studies focusing on such a vulnerable and protected population as adolescent firesetters. Future researchers and academic institutions need to develop and promote better solutions to conducting justice-involved juvenile justice studies, particularly to youthful offenders of fire, as a promising position in light of the challenges associated with conducting studies within such a protected population.

For the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters, the emerging themes of parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters *recommend adopting tools to assess better a youth abusing alcohol and cannabis and that youth with behavioral and mental health issues be addressed separately from other generalized adolescent offenders and that the fire marshal's office staff increase training to access and treat the child firesetter with alcohol and cannabis dependency.* These themes are similar to the perceptions of

parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters that have emerged from themes derived from research question one.

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in the United States, and trends show increasing use of synthetic cannabis in the juvenile population (Karrila & Benyamina, 2018). A review of the available literature suggests a correlation between cannabis consumption and various psychiatric conditions, including adolescent cannabis-induced psychosis (Grigorenko et al., 2020). Specifically, in youthful offenders of fire, there is a stakeholder perception that a relationship exists between cannabis use and the youthful misuse of fire. In comparison, justice-involved juvenile offenders displaying signs of agitation and acute cannabis psychosis were also persistent among the adolescent population of malicious firesetters (Grigorenko et al., 2020). Cannabis is an environmental risk factor that increases the odds of psychotic episodes (Karila & Benyamina, 2018). The greater or more prolonged the exposure to cannabis within the juvenile population, the greater the risk of psychosis (Dembo & Pacheco, 2021). At the same time, several factors play a role in the delivery mechanism for cannabis-induced psychosis; Yurasek, Kemp, Otero, and Tolou-Shams (2021), the primary psychoactive ingredient is delta 8-tetrahydrocannabinol and 9-tetrahydrocannabinol, both of which are legally obtainable without a prescription within this study's geographical area. Research by Banks, Hershberger, Pemberton, Clifton, Aalsma, and Zapolski (2019) suggests an association between adolescents who have received alcohol and cannabis abuse treatment and destructive firesetting behavior.

Furthermore, family history may help distinguish cannabis-induced psychosis from primary psychosis. Research by Bosk, Anthony, Folk, and Williams-Butler (2021)

suggests that cannabis-derived psychosis strongly correlates with schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders among first or second-generation relatives. Abstaining from synthetic cannabis is a valuable and practical measure to preventing future psychosis among the juvenile firesetting population (Bosk et al., 2021). A delay in providing intensive psychosocial treatment has been associated with more negative outcomes among justice-involved youth compared to more positive outcomes from youth who receive early intensive psychosocial treatment (Bath et al., 2020). The research of Bath, Barnert, Godoy, Hammond, Mondals, Farabee, and Grella (2020) supports the stakeholder perceptions that juveniles who are treated with motivational early intensive psychosocial treatment in addition to standard of care and positive mentoring are reported to have more confidence and willingness to reduce cannabis use resulting in more positive outcomes (Bath et al., 2020).

As more states approve the legalization of marijuana and synthetic cannabis becomes more accessible among the juvenile population, cannabis-induced psychosis and other cannabis-related disorders are expected to increase (Bath et al., 2020). The perceptions of the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters that were interviewed as part of this study suggest efforts should be made by the fire marshal's office staff to educate both custodians and dependents of youthful fire offenders about the increased risk of behavioral and mental health disorders associated with alcohol and cannabis use and to take an evidence-based approach to this growing juvenile justice problem.

Moreover, it must be noted that parents/guardians believe that future program improvement also depends on increasing the number of skilled professionals capable enough to address the behavioral and mental health needs of youthful fire offenders.

Furthermore, the perceptions of the stakeholders, in particular regarding adolescent firesetting, is that the fire marshal's office staff must be skilled with trauma-informed care to improve the current intervention and prevention services.

Such entailed and small perspectives of the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters are vital to understanding where these stakeholders are coming from in that they strive to be more hands-on regarding the care and intervention that the youthful fire offender receives compared to what the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program can provide. The perception and focus by the adolescent caregiver on trauma-informed care confirm the need for interventions by the fire marshal's office to focus on a trauma-informed approach that encompasses all aspects of the child's life and all community stakeholders within the juvenile justice system (Bosk et al., 2020). Improving the competencies of the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program regarding trauma-informed care is possible with an administrative shift in policy to include additional training and the embedding of skilled practitioners into the fire marshal's office staff. Research by Bosk, Anthony, Folk, and Williams-Butler (2021) embraces the widespread impact of trauma in juvenile firesetters and an understanding of total community-involved reinvestment to increase the possibilities of better positive adolescent social outcomes. Perceptions of the parents/guardians interviewed for this study regarding better social outcomes include recognizing signs and symptoms of trauma in the juvenile firesetter, alcohol and cannabis abuse, and a lack of critical thinking skills and independence that can lead to indoctrination. An assessment needs to include all aspects of the adolescent's family. Reinvestment remains possible through integrating trauma-informed care into juvenile diversion policies, procedures, and

practices, along with active resistance by institutions, practitioners, and all stakeholders of justice-involved reinvestment to stop the furtherance of traumatization to this at-risk and vulnerable adolescent population (Banister, 2018).

Themes derived from research question one and question two yelled similar perceptions from the custodians of juvenile firesetters interviewed: *parents and guardians of juvenile firesetters recommend incorporating critical thinking skills and independence into the program's curriculum*; this reiterates how the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters perceive the needs for improvement to focuses on the overall well-being of their dependent, which is consequential from an all-encompassing community-stakeholder perspective. Research by Smokowski, Bacallao, Evans, Rose, Stalker, Guo, Wu, Barbee, and Bower (2018) indicates that parents/guardians of youthful offenders of fire who reported juvenile justice involvement versus no involvement were more likely to report behavioral and mental health issues, substance abuse, delinquency, and disruptive behaviors like firesetting through indoctrination and lack of critical thinking and independence.

Additional findings by Smokowski, Bacallao, Evans, Rose, Stalker, Guo, Wu, Barbee, and Bower (2018) documented that the higher the number of contacts amassed through social media by the adolescent, the higher the rates of delinquent behavior, alcohol, and cannabis use, promiscuous sexual behavior, commercial sexing, and indoctrination into antisocial groups (Smokowski et al., 2018). The perceptions of parents/guardians interviewed for this study suggest that identifying and targeting youth with multiple contacts, especially those that use multimedia formats, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc., may be beneficial to promoting critical thinking and

independence among this at-risk and vulnerable juvenile population (Smokowski et al., 2018). The perceptions of the parents/guardians interviewed for this study expressed the need for future researchers to examine whether peer networking norms and online indoctrination campaigns, coupled with a lack of in-person positive mentoring, might mediate the relationship between disruptive juvenile behavior, including adolescent firesetting.

Research by Baskin-Sommers, Simmons, Conley, Chang, Estrada, Collins, Pelham, Beckford, Mitchell-Adams, Berrian, Tapert, Gee and Casey (2021) reveals that exposure to community violence is identified and can be categorized by victimization and witnessing. By being exposed to deliberate harm initiated by another person, such as being physically attacked, shot, or stabbed, or the victim of police brutality, witnessing includes hearing or seeing violent events in person or through multimedia outlets (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2021). In particular, to this study is the emergence of themes from the perspective of parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters in which adopting a disruptive mindset and antisocial behaviors become an act of loyalty to a collective identity that is often prioritized over individual human value (Smokowski et al., 2018). Along with continued mass media and cell phone use, social-emotional learning is often facilitated by groups that target the most vulnerable among the at-risk juvenile population (Smokowski et al., 2018). The perceptions of the parents/guardians interviewed for this study correlate to academic research by Kalmoe, Fuller, Santia, and Saha (2022) that the result of misinterpreted social-emotional learning results in inappropriate disruptive behavior often expressed in acts of violence and destructive firesetting in place of critical thinking and independence.

Research on juvenile development found that the rise in violent demonstrations after the killing of George Floyd and subsequent media coverage of Black Lives Matter demonstrations profoundly affected the nation's adolescent population and was detrimental to minimizing the traumatization and indoctrination of justice-involved youthful fire offenders (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2021). Similar themes emerged from research questions one and two to show that the never-ending 24/7 news cycle complemented by the abundance of social media platforms of the ongoing violent demonstrations of Black Lives Matter protests that surrounded the death of George Floyd added to the traumatization experiences and indoctrination of at-risk youth that resulted in externalizing emotions with a perceived justification for malicious firesetting (Kalmoe et al., 2022). Parents/guardians interviewed for this study perceived that their child's motivation for malicious firesetting was perceived injustices and indoctrination through acts of disruption and malicious firesetting that resulted in their dependent's involvement in the juvenile justice system. The parents/guardians of adolescent firesetters' perception are that the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program can mediate indoctrination and re-traumatization of at-risk youth by incorporating critical thinking skills that promote self-worth and independence into the program's curriculum. The stakeholder's perception is to add proactive administrative and policy outreach services to the existing reactive juvenile reinvestment system through the promotion of mentorship programs that are more welcoming to police and fire service personnel mentoring middle school and high school youth in a program similar to the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps or JROTC (Lindsey, 2022). The stakeholders perceive this type of policy shift and administrative change as having the potential to build better relationships

between middle school and high school youth and the local police and fire service personnel (Meyer & Rinn, 2022). Most importantly, stakeholders perceive this proactive policy change could be used to identify at-risk youth before they offend or re-offend and minimize indoctrination and traumatization through mentorship, purpose, self-worth, pride, independence, and critical thinking.

Triangulated analysis of the perspectives of the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters for research question two propose the adoption of trauma-informed care procedures into the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program and is supported by the research literature (Bosk et al., 2021). The stakeholders perceived the need to adopt a valid risk and need an assessment tool to evaluate all juvenile firesetters and too narrow in on a specific level of care that incorporates a more accurate behavioral and mental health status to promote a more positive outcome for the adolescent firesetter (Dembo & Pacheco, 2021). It was perceived by the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters that the competencies and skills of the fire marshal's office staff must be improved by integrating policies, procedures, and practices to understand the abuse of alcohol and cannabis by adolescents better and that the youthful fire offender with behavioral and mental health issues be addressed outside of generalized juvenile diversion programs and that the possibility of better social outcomes for young offenders of fire participating in a reinvestment program is possible by increasing the trauma-informed training and access to skilled practitioners for the fire marshal's office staff. The ability to separate youthful offenders of fire that suffer from behavioral and mental health issues is congruent with the notion that all elements of the juvenile justice system, including sheriffs, fire chiefs, police chiefs, fire marshals, and skilled youth practitioners

of mental health along with all community stakeholders collaborate to address the needs of this vulnerable and at-risk population (Grigorenko et al., 2020). Moreover, the means to improve the program is by increasing the number of fire marshals, fire prevention personnel, and their counterparts in law enforcement and the juvenile justice system with appropriately trained members capable of identifying behavioral and mental health issues (Grigorenko et al., 2020).

In summary, the emerging themes demonstrated how the parents/guardians perceived the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetters program. Moreover, these themes allowed for the nuancing of program improvement through the perspectives of the individual participating parent/guardian. At the same time, triangulation highlighted the areas of similarity among the different stakeholder perspectives. The emergence of these themes reiterates the parents/guardians' belief that the overall welfare of the juvenile firesetter must be considered by incorporating insight from all community stakeholders in the reinvestment process.

Parents/guardians perceive their concerns with policies and procedures as reflected in the belief that increasing the number of skilled practitioners and trained fire marshal's office staff through policy changes is vital to addressing the behavioral and mental health issues of youth who misuse fire. Moreover, the perceptions of parents/guardians of adolescent firesetters emphasize the need for trauma-informed care as vital for juvenile diversion. This is possible by training the fire marshal's office staff to be well-informed regarding alcohol and cannabis abuse in trauma-inspired adolescent firesetting behavior. Of significance, this study revealed the perceptions of parents/guardians of justice-involved juvenile firesetters of the fire marshal's office need

to incorporate critical thinking skills and self-worth, and independence into the program's curriculum. In addition, the stakeholders perceived the effects of negative contacts and a lack of positive police and fire personnel mentorships as a detriment to positive adolescent development. Successful youth outcomes are perceived by the custodians of firesetting dependents to be hamstrung by the indoctrination of youth into groups like Black Lives Matter, which the stakeholders perceived to promote a disruptive mindset and encourage antisocial behaviors as loyalty to a collective identity that is prioritized over the individualized well-being of the adolescent. This indoctrination re-traumatizes the at-risk adolescent by robbing them of their independence and critical thinking abilities and, when externalized through malicious firesetting, results in juvenile justice involvement. The emerging themes revealed that according to the parents/guardians of youthful firesetters interviewed, the violence portrayed on 24/7 news and social media could result in indoctrination and disruptive firesetting behavior. The parents/guardians of adolescent firesetters perceive that the fire marshal's office and the juvenile justice system need to incorporate critical thinking and independence into the current program and that indoctrination and the resulting externalizing of strain and aggression were exacerbated through social learning and prior traumatization that resulted in intentional malicious firesetting and could be mediated by embracing police and fire officials as positive role models within the school system through a community outreach service similar to that of Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps or JROTC that is available in most middle school and high school. The limitation of the study is discussed in the following subsection.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study revealed insights into juvenile firesetting through the custodial lens. However, the findings must still be interpreted in light of the current study's limitations. A primary limitation of the study is the theoretical framework specific to the General Strain Theory of Agnew (1992) and the Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1977) and the research questions used to guide the study. As discussed, Agnew's General Strain Theory provides a possible explanation for the externalization of juvenile delinquency (Smith & Natalier, 2021). The general strain theory explains how stressors in developing adolescents can externalize in the strain or act of firesetting (Slavkin & Fineman, 2020). The study, by utilizing Bandura's Social Learning Theory, aimed to achieve insight into how juveniles become exposed to behavioral and anti-social influences within communities; this conceptual theory remains relevant to the research to understand juvenile firesetting and custodial impact when attempting reinvestment (Cox-Jones et al., 2020). However, the research questions explicitly focused on the perceptions of parents and guardians of adolescents regarding the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes of the juvenile firesetting program and these stakeholder perceptions of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting reinvestment program based on experiences and observations of their adolescent's journey through reinvestment. While the emerging themes provided insightful data into the perspectives of parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters, it was challenging to contextualize these themes in terms of general strain and social learning theories because they revolved around policies, procedures, and practices within an established bureaucracy. I attempted to address these limitations by utilizing

research questions formulated from the custodial lens to understand better justice-involved youth afflicted by malicious firesetting tendencies.

Additional limitations were briefly discussed in chapter 1 and relate to the generalizability of the geographical location of the study. Due to the specific geographical area of this study, it cannot be said that the experiences and perspectives of the parents/guardians of juvenile firesetters are similar to the experiences of stakeholders in other jurisdictions, mainly because each authority of jurisdiction within each state has different external factors that impinge upon the experiences and perceptions of the caretakers of justice-involved youthful firesetters. I address this by expressing the need for future studies to look into other geographical locations and understand the similarities and differences between the same at-risk and vulnerable juvenile firesetting populations.

Regarding the theoretical limitations, it had been challenging to infer direct relationships between the emerging themes due to the research approach needed to comply with a study specific to a protected population such as juveniles. While a qualitative case study is significant to understand the stakeholders' experiences regarding the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program, one cannot guarantee that these themes are related. To address this issue, the researcher needs future studies to be conducted regarding this specific phenomenon of interest using generic qualitative research methods and thematic analysis of interviews with another community stakeholder in the hopes of understanding how these themes and variables are related to each other and if they are predictors of the effectiveness of a juvenile firesetting reinvestment program.

To recapitulate, the current study's limitations involve the conceptual fit of the general strain and social learning theories and the research questions, the data generalizability, and the inference of specific relationships among the emerging themes. To address this, I expressed the need for future studies to adopt a multistage sampling to understand the correlations of these variables between other geographical locations and to compare the result of this study on a national level.

### **Recommendations**

When comparing the strengths and limitations of this study, future researchers are asked to adopt a qualitative approach to enhance the theoretical implications of the current themes revealed in this study. A multistage sampling in which the researcher draws a sample from a population using smaller and smaller groups at each stage could be utilized to collect data from a larger, more geographically spread out group of people across the nation (Ashraf et al., 2020). This would be beneficial in understanding how other groups differ in terms of their perspectives and how these variables and emerging themes relate to one another (Showers & Pickrell, 2019). In contrast, knowledge of the predictors and mediators could be obtained (Ashraf et al., 2020). It could improve the current literature on juvenile firesetting and the perception of outcomes of justice-involved youthful fire offenders.

The link between traumatization, indoctrination, alcohol and cannabis abuse, and behavioral and mental health issues among adolescent offenders has been well-established in the literature (Bell et al., 2018). In comparison, juvenile firesetting reinvestment has lagged behind these new insights and has inadvertently retraumatized many at-risk and vulnerable adolescents by treating them in generalized youthful

offender programs and not addressing their specific and unique needs necessary to produce positive social outcomes (Bradford & Dimock, 2019).

I expressed the need for future studies to understand how youthful offenders perceive their lived experiences within the juvenile firesetters prevention and intervention program. In comparison, the current study provided a wealth of data regarding the different custodial perspectives; one crucial perspective needed to be included: the view from the lens of the youthful firesetter. It would be of academic interest to study how justice-involved youth navigate through the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program and their perspective throughout their reinvestment journey. This would also entail a qualitative approach so that future researchers can understand the experiences of adolescent firesetters and their journey to achieving better social outcomes through treatment.

### **Implications**

This study offered theoretical knowledge on how the parents/guardians of youthful offenders of fire perceived the impact of their involvement on successful outcomes and their perception of the effectiveness of the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program based on observations of their adolescent's attempt at reinvestment. By acquiring and comparing, and contrasting these individual perspectives, rich evidence-based data was obtained for the benefit of institutions, practitioners of youth trauma-informed care, the parents/guardians of adolescents who misuse fire, and the individual juvenile firesetter.

In the organizational structure, institutions can benefit from these findings by recognizing the vital role of skilled practitioners of trauma-informed care in addressing

not only the general but the specific needs of adolescent malicious firesetters. Moreover, it was established within the study that the subject organization needs more skilled practitioners in trauma-informed care. More training is required for fire marshals to ensure that successful intervention and prevention services offered through a juvenile firesetting program can deliver successful reinvestment outcomes. Furthermore, the study established the institutional need to recruit competent practitioners skilled in trauma-informed care specific to juvenile firesetting. These practitioners need to be incorporated into the fire marshal's office staff. Despite the well-documented epidemiology of juvenile firesetters and their unique exposure to trauma and the influences of alcohol and cannabis abuse and indoctrination effects upon their psychopathology, there remains an inadequate understanding of the multifaceted layers of an adolescent who misuses fire, and there is a lack of national and regional tracking specific to juvenile firesetters. Implications to this study's findings include institutional policy and procedural changes regarding adapting instrumentation or tools and assessment procedures for juvenile firesetters. This way, intervention and prevention services are administered with an individualized and specific treatment program to produce better social outcomes among the adolescent firesetting population.

The study also revealed the vital role of parents/guardians and offered an understanding of their impact on the intervention and prevention services received by their youthful fire offenders. The current study showed that the primary concern of parents/guardians is the overall reinvestment of their child and the quality of intervention and prevention services received. Thus it is imperative that to obtain a positive social

outcome, the parents/guardians are highly involved and invested in the prevention and intervention of a child who misuses fire.

Specific to administrators and policymakers, the study's findings highlight the importance of developing trauma-informed care interventions to address the need for more individualized and specific treatment programs better capable of producing positive social outcomes for justice-involved adolescent firesetters. The research has shown that an increasing number of justice-involved youthful fire offenders have experienced some traumatization at the hands of a close relative or family member or witnessed violence firsthand. By conceptualizing the emerging themes that evolved from the study's research questions and theorizing the stakeholder's perspectives through general strain and social learning theories, I interpreted the acquired data through thematic analysis to promote positive social change among an at-risk juvenile firesetting population. Of significance, future researchers are challenged to look for ways to improve the current juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention curriculum by integrating trauma-informed care, behavioral and mental health treatment, alcohol and cannabis treatment, and to mediate indoctrination by adopting critical thinking and independence into the existing reinvestment curriculum and to adopt a certified assessment tool to aid in the early identification of at-risk youthful firesetters through program outreach into the school system aided by police and fire personnel in a role of mentorship.

### **Conclusion**

This study proves that the stakeholder's perception of the youthful misuse of fire requires an all-encompassing curriculum to address youth traumatization, along with adolescent alcohol and cannabis use, which is often compounded by behavioral and

mental health issues that position juvenile firesetters to be more easily indoctrinated when compared to other more generalized youthful offenders. Adolescents are increasingly more at risk of developing disruptive firesetting tendencies when they experience those conditions mentioned above, which have been proven to impact successful reinvestment treatment negatively. Therefore the purpose of this study was to understand the parents/guardians of youthful fire offenders' perceptions of their impact on their child's reinvestment and to gain further insight from these essential stakeholders' perceptions of what was effective or not practical and what, if any, recommendations they have to offer that may aid in producing positive social outcomes for this often misrepresented and misunderstood at-risk juvenile population. This chapter provided the perceptions of a juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program through the eyes of the community's most important stakeholder, the juvenile offender's parent/guardian. The researcher collected data from the stakeholders interviewed to examine the effectiveness of such a community-based juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program. The emerging themes were analyzed in this qualitative study through thematic analysis that produced valuable insight into this phenomenon and revealed what is working and what is not, allowing future researchers to build upon a working method to promote more successful juvenile reinvestment outcomes.

The results of this study show that each interviewed stakeholder highlighted their impact upon their child's ability to complete the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program. Parents/guardians prioritized their child's struggles and concerns for policy and procedural changes and improvements. The stakeholders emphasized the importance of adapting trauma-informed care, alcohol and cannabis use treatment, the need for critical

thinking and independence, increased fire marshal's office staff, and the adoption of skilled practitioners into the current reinvestment program.

Improvements for the juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program were also mentioned; as youthful fire offenders are involved in diversion struggle, so does the juvenile justice system, law enforcement, the fire service, and the child's community with ways to better reinvest in these adolescent firesetters. I recommend that future studies examine the different jurisdictions of authority within the other states by utilizing multistage sampling to gain a national perspective on juvenile firesetting reinvestment programs. Implications for this study include addressing the recommended policy changes, procedural changes, and administrative changes to the existing juvenile firesetters reinvestment program through the integration of adolescent trauma-informed care and training to assist with alcohol and cannabis use among adolescents and skills to address the often misunderstood and misdiagnosed behavioral and mental health issues specific to youthful firesetters, and a new curriculum that addresses youth indoctrination into self-severing political groups that rob these at-risk juveniles of their independence and critical thinking abilities.

This study's findings highlight the importance of developing more specific and less generalized reinvestment programs that are more specific to youthful offenders of fire and incorporate treatment ideas from all community-based stakeholders' into an individualized reinvestment curriculum that strives to be a better and more complete program that addresses custodial perspectives and promotes outreach into the school system by increasing fire and police mentorships that aims to identify at-risk youth before they become involved with the juvenile justice system and to offer those that do offend a

safer less traumatizing path to juvenile reinvestment that continues with follow-up through the continuation of mentorship, guidance and continued treatment outside of the program.

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## Appendix A: Introduction to the Study

Name of Participant:

Date:

Address:

Dear (Name)

My name is Peter Blaich, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research that examines the effectiveness of community-based juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention programs through the lens of adolescents' parents and guardians. Many studies detail the multifaceted issues that affect juvenile firesetters and adolescents who engage in destructive firesetting behavior. Adolescent firesetting prevention and intervention programs appear to be the most used alternative sentencing initiative available to youthful fire offenders in North Carolina communities. This study will provide insight into the juvenile firesetting problem in North Carolina and the effectiveness of the state's adolescent firesetting programs.

Your assistance with this much-needed research is of vital importance. However, I realize your time is essential; therefore, please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study. To fully understand your experience as the parent or guardian of a juvenile deferred to the City of Charlotte/Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetters Intervention and Prevention Program, I would need to meet with you in person or via Zoom (depending on the current health and safety protocols in place at the fire academy) for one session of approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

All information gathered during our meeting and throughout this dissertation research will be kept strictly confidential and will not affect the outcome of any pending court action or program participation involving your dependent. Moreover, this meeting is designed to get to know you and learn about your perceptions of the juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program. Your dependent will not be interviewed or identified throughout this study, as the inquiry aims to get the perspectives of parents and guardians about what works and what does not work within this reinvestment program.

Please get in touch with me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time when we can meet. Feel free to contact me by email at [peter.blaich@waldenu.edu](mailto:peter.blaich@waldenu.edu) with any questions or concerns. I look forward to hearing from you and gaining valuable insights regarding this adolescent firesetting reinvestment program.

Peter Blaich

*Peter Blaich*  
Doctoral Candidate  
Walden University

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

Date:

Location:

Name of Interviewer:

Name of Interviewee:

Interview Number: Parent or Guardian

1. In your experience, do you feel that the City of Charlotte/Mecklenburg County has the right treatment programs to meet the needs of an adolescent who engages in malicious firesetting?
2. Do you feel that those in the City of Charlotte/Mecklenburg County Fire Marshal's Office have the proper training and education to meet the needs of your dependent?
3. Do you personally see malicious firesetting among juveniles as a rising problem within the state of North Carolina?
4. Why do you feel that many young fire offenders are referred to the City of Charlotte/Mecklenburg County Juvenile Firesetters Intervention and Prevention Program?
5. Do you believe that the juvenile firesetters reinvestment program will reduce your dependent's firesetting behavior?
6. Do you believe the firesetting prevention and intervention program changes how you approach your dependent?

7. Would you recommend this program to another parent or guardian of a juvenile firesetter?
8. What should we include or exclude from the subsequent juvenile firesetters intervention and prevention program?
9. Overall, have your dependent's participation in this juvenile firesetting intervention and prevention program benefited them?